Existential Spatiality and Photography as Social Form

Andrew Thomas Fisher

A Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

September 2006

Slade School of Art

University College London

ProQuest LLC
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research upon which this thesis is based was made possible by the award of a scholarship from the Arts and Humanities Research Board, for which I would like to express my appreciation. The Graduate School at UCL awarded me a grant that made an extremely helpful and formative research trip possible, for which I am also grateful. I would like to thank John Hilliard, Norman Bryson and Penny Florence at the Slade School of Art for the support they offered at different times during this project and am especially grateful to Steve Edwards for stepping in to offer valuable input in its later stages. It was a pleasure to work alongside Sas Mays and Gordon Shrigley, who both had a great impact on the progress of my research and I would like to acknowledge the friendship and support offered by Alex Warwick and David Cunningham, which is much appreciated.

As ever, Stewart Martin and Frances Stracey were the most perceptive and interesting critics that one could wish for as well as being great friends. Finally, my deepest thanks have to go to Britta Eickholt without whom things would just not make sense and this project would not have been started, let alone finished.

Andrew Fisher, *This is a picture of something that turned out to be quite difficult to see*, 2006.

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an attempt to write a phenomenology of photography. It is undertaken in response to significant tendencies in contemporary photographic culture that make central a range of phenomenological themes and issues. Though critical discourse on photography has recently adopted phenomenological categories and, despite the fact that recent photographic practices have come to stress issues of a phenomenological nature, there exists no attempt to think photography explicitly in phenomenological terms. What follows is an attempt to respond to this situation theoretically and critically.

Recent practice and criticism have shown photography to be a problematic form of the production of social meaning and this had led to a marked stress on cultural specificity in attempts to understand it and to use it. As such, it would seem to resist articulation in terms of a transcendental or eidetic phenomenology, (which tends towards the formalisation of photographic temporality as an ontological condition) yet, such temporal formalism is the dominant mode of (what thus remain partial) attempts to understand photography phenomenologically. This tendency colours much that might stand as a phenomenological discourse of photographic culture and serves to limit its critical valency. The thesis presented here takes Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical critique of transcendental phenomenology as a model for thinking the possibility and the value of a socio-historically reflexive phenomenology of photography as a social form and it does so by concentrating on core problems that are articulated in his writings on art and perception.

A detailed critique of what is here taken to be the only compelling candidate for an explicit phenomenology of photography; Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* reveals the problematic character of any eidetic theorisation of photography in terms of temporality

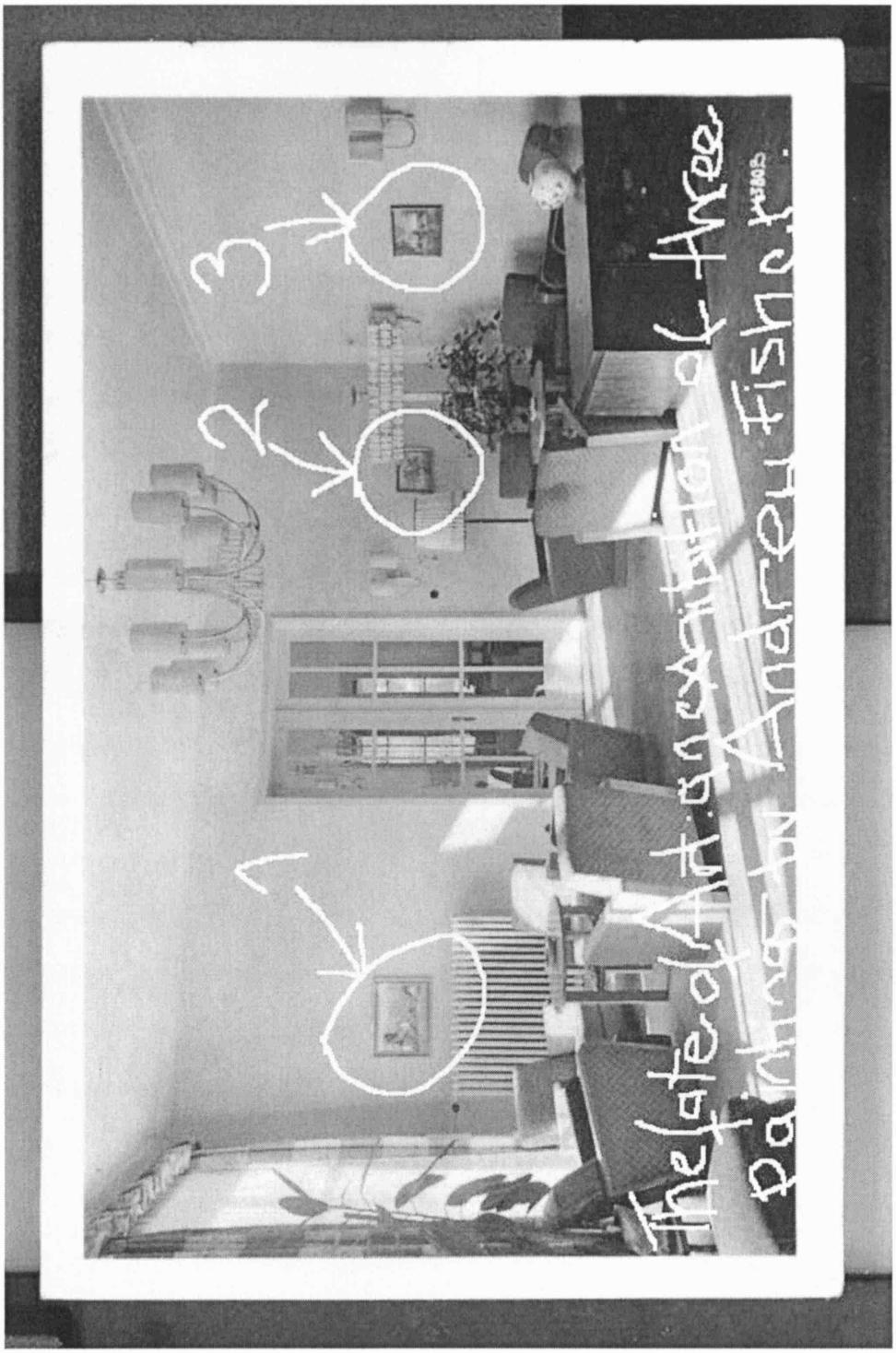
alone. This text exemplifies the manner in which eidetic phenomenology, in this context, is unreflexive in the face of the socio-historical characteristic of photographic spatio-temporality. A range of Merleau-Pontian concepts developed through his attempt to theorise lived experience in terms of the 'reversibility' of embodied perception, the expressive character of language, his theorisation of these as contextualised by a notion of actively produced existential 'dimensionality' and his later radicalisation of the visible as 'flesh' are examined as conceptual resources through which to think the relations and problems highlighted by discussion of Barthes. These themes, it is argued, are most appropriately articulated in terms of Merleau-Ponty's distinctive notion of art.

The conceptual framework suggested by these discussions demand to be 'tested out' so as to assess the descriptive purchase, critical value and historical relevance that a phenomenological theory of photography developed on their basis might have. The photographic work of Emilio Prini, with its emphasises on issues of embodiment, its problematisation of immediate perceptual experience and its stress on the material characteristics of photographic mediation suggests itself as being immediately and intuitively appropriate to such a task. Analysis of the technically mediated forms of construction structuring this practice provide a rich resource for articulation of relations between specific modes of embodiment and their particular historical contexts. However, ultimately, this analysis suggests, but cannot offer a means of articulating a more socially reflexive basis for a phenomenology of mediated perceptual experience. Allan Sekula's critical, existentially oriented project attempts to establish a specifically photographic-art of social critique that foregrounds issues of spatiality and stresses the phenomenological conditions of spectatorship in ways, I argue, that promise to extend the rich phenomenological implications of Prini's use of photography into a more socio-historically specific register.

EXISTENTIAL SPATIALITY AND PHOTOGRAPHY AS SOCIAL FORM

FIGURES

ILLUSTRATED ARTWORKS



Andrew Fisher, *Forwards on the new course for the health and happiness of our people*, 2006.

There is a Phenomenological Tendency in Recent Photographic Culture. Why is There no Explicit Attempt to Think it Phenomenologically?

Photography's definitive achievement of an art status has provided the context for a wide range of photographic practices (historical and contemporary) to be celebrated—in museums and galleries of traditional and contemporary art, in critical discourse and in sales rooms—under what, in the context, seems the unambiguous but indeterminate name of art. Despite (or, perhaps, because of) the otiose critical and historical character of debates about whether photography is or is not an art, the indeterminate lack of ambiguity that its achievement of an indubitable art status signals is worthy of critical attention. One of the most important reasons for this is that although it seems quite straightforward to claim photography as an art now, the status of the concept art in this relation has become rather uncertain and this is despite manifest appearances to the contrary. One might argue that the final achievement of photography as art has intensified rather than dissolved the need for questioning its art status but the purpose of pursuing such questions has changed. This thesis addresses the problematic status of this notion if art by making emphatic the relation to broader issues of a phenomenology of aesthetic experience as articulated in terms of the Husserlian philosophical tradition and especially in light of Merleau-Ponty's critical interrogation of its terms, procedures and implications.

Over the last few decades, the term 'photography' has come to be thought by many as a problematic concept due to the invention, refinement and widespread dissemination of digital technologies and developments such as the internet. It is surely a familiar, but nonetheless important, observation that it is not any longer clear whether the term photography still describes what was once taken to be a more or less clearly defined,

dominant image form and/or whether it describes a constitutively historical set of practices that survive in current usage as a terminological convenience. Indeed, the more sophisticated theoretical attempts to come to terms with recent technological developments in image making have remarked and attempted to understand the fact that the concept of 'the image' and not only the 'photographic image' may have been undercut and perhaps even rendered obsolete by novel technological forms based in the algorithmic ordering, re-ordering and multiple format display of bits of information rather then the light sensitive properties of chemically treated materials and optics. One implication of this situation is that what might before have been taken to be a strict corollary between a kind of image and the mode of perception thought to be most appropriate to thinking about experience of it has also seemed to dissolve, thus rendering prior notions of the image and visual experience and of the cultural forms based upon them, ripe for theoretical reconsideration.[1] It is odd, then, that it is this very moment at which photography achieved its long sought art status by asserting itself so emphatically as Photography. Photography arrives as an art, it seems, just when the founding conceptual assertion that it remains *photography* is put in question. In this light, one can note the recent description offered by David Green and Joanna Lowry in their, "From Presence to the Performative: Rethinking Photographic Indexicality":

> Beginning in the late 1980s and gathering momentum with the increasing availability of these new technologies, the force of critical opinion has lain largely with those who—believing that the medium's privileged status as an arbiter of truth and measure of reality had been fatefully undermined by computerized imaging processes—have sought to reconcile us to the 'death of photography'. Yet, paradoxically, during this same period we have also witnessed a fascination amongst a younger generation of photographers with precisely those qualities and values associated with the medium that have been deemed most at risk and which has led to the attempt to recuperate that particular engagement with reality that photography seems to offer.[2]

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[1] For an example of one such, recent and rather sophisticated attempt see Mark Hanson's, *New Philosophy for New Media*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004. Also see my review of this publication in *Radical Philosophy*, no. 129, January/February, 2005.

[2] David Green & Joanna Lowry, "From Presence to the Performative: Rethinking Photographic Indexicality", *Where is the Photograph?*, Brighton & Maidstone: Photoforum & Photoworks, 2003, p. 47.

But what does it mean to claim that this context is shaped by "an emergent tendency to think photography phenomenologically"? There are many different senses this claim might have. The reference to digital technologies of image making is the most obvious. It has meant that through transformation of the possibility of forming images and through the massive expansion of their means of dissemination a greater emphasis on the spatial figures of simultaneity and distance has arisen to transform the kinds of photographic temporality previously thought of as structuring photographic experience. Yet, as Green and Lowry remark, this situation has been accompanied by a growing emphasis on the photographic character of many art practices. Here, in a space, arguably opened by Conceptual art, one might say the return of photography has authorised a range of assertions regarding the phenomenological character of photographs and their form of reference to or separation from the swiftly moving and intrinsically changeable character of information. Working backwards, from recent production one can remark a recent emphasis on perception as exemplified by the work of Uta Barth, whose large scale, highly coloured and deliberately unfocussed images of banal urban scenes stage the relation between the lens's range of possible operation and the perceptual encounter with massively enlarged prints that foreground the pixilation of the image.[3] In a different vein, one might note the stress on enigmatic forms of temporality in the staging of photographic tableaux by Gregory Crewdson (taken as a representative of a widespread and now generic practice of the staged image in recent art photography), such as is evidenced in his famous image, *Untitled (Ophelia)* of 2001. These exemplary instances can be seen to derive much of their claim to a photographic art status from

[3] For example, see, Uta Barth, *Field #23*, 1998. Barth's hazy photographs are conventionally discussed as occupying a "territory" between abstraction and representation. Their lack of focus, the matte surfaces and heavy wooden backing of these large images place great emphasis on their presence as "objects. They rely on the possibilities of large scale to establish themselves on this territory (*Field 23#* measures 90 x 132 inches). The titling of this series also makes reference to the Gestalt theory of vision, one series being entitled "field" and another "ground".

celebrated predecessors, namely, Jeff Wall, Bernd and Hilla Becher and Cindy Sherman, whose practice have arguably shaped much of current practice and have definitely come to saturate critical discourse on photographic art over the last three decades. The stress on re-staging dramatically banal everyday events in a luxuriant photographic form with Wall, of the Bechers' serial recording, ordering and display of neglected industrial buildings and Sherman's manner of foregrounding performative aspects of the construction of identity all entail a complex array of emphases on the phenomenological experience of the images and these emphases have had an enormous influence on the form of photographic art pursued by subsequent practices.

One should note, however, that despite such emphases, there really does not exist what one might call an explicit, formal or even 'proper' phenomenological discourse of such photography. Whether one thinks the very idea of such a theory is necessary, desirable, unwise or even ridiculous, it must surely be a surprise given the massive and distinctively pluralist sphere of contemporary academic discourse that such a theory does not exist.

On reflection, the reasons for this may not be so difficult to imagine. Photography is and has been since the early twentieth century treated with suspicion by phenomenological philosophy of all kinds. This is true whether one thinks in terms of photography's exemplary status as a mode of technology (here, one might say that it has been received as a phantom form of degraded realism that promises to bring the real world near, but in effect distances one from what is significant in perceptual experience, perhaps). It is also true when one considers phenomenologically oriented theories of the arts (which, in formal, scholarly phenomenological discourse have concentrated almost entirely on the forms of visual perception taken to pertain to painting and sculpture).

One can consider this in relation to the ways that in the 1960s a range of self-consciously critical challenges to strict definitions of the visual arts in terms of the aesthetic, or perceptual, conditions of any experience upon which judgement of their value might be made, and that these challenges found form in minimalism, post-minimalism and performance art of various kinds (which lay critical transformed, or expanded, stress on perception as a phenomenological category). Furthermore, as claims on art these, in turn, provoked a range of attempts at the outright rejection of perception and its phenomenological explanations, notably, in the form of conceptual art of different stamps. This schematic description of a historical trajectory is extremely important for an attempt to understand the fate of explicitly phenomenological accounts of art as such in the subsequent period. It also throws light on the character of influential developments in photographic discourse that followed. One can note the significance of the fact that many artists took up public positions of a critical nature on their works (say, for instance, Judd, Morris, Rosler, Sekula, Burgin and Piper to name a few rather different examples). Though there is a danger of generalisation here, one can say that the kinds of theories to which such artists turned were generally not those that could be found sedimented in the art history and art criticism of the time. One such theoretical influence was the discourse of perception to be found in the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology (especially as taken up and extended in the existentialism of post-World War II France). Such phenomenologically influenced art history and criticism has another, complex history of rejection and affirmation as it was also perceived by many in the generation of art critics and historians of the 1970s to be deeply problematic and, in parallel to critically self-assertive artists adopting the position of theorists of culture, critically self-conscious discourse on the status, practice and scope of art history turned to theories such as psychoanalysis and semiotics to pursue socially

and culturally critical aims oriented towards Feminist, Marxist, and later deconstructivist or broadly speaking discursively constituted critiques of culture.

This matrix of critical and theoretical trajectories is, indeed, much more complex than any summary that can be given here and its history and theoretical evaluation is yet to be performed in the terms of its relation to phenomenology. However, it does give an idea of why it is that, on one side of cultural criticism so to speak, the idea of pursuing a phenomenology of photography might seem problematic.

Another set of considerations should also be noted. One might argue that, within photographic discourse there exists a large range of more or less technically oriented accounts of photography that are deeply involved in examination of the sorts of themes and questions addressed by the Husserlian tradition of philosophy. One might say that the empirically oriented, technical discourse of optics and chemistry and the discourse of seeing that informs and structures it could be called an effective phenomenology. However, there is something of critical value to be gained by asserting the opposite (at least in the framing of this study). The features of technical discourse on optics and chemistry that has shaped photographic theory (before this term was co-opted by those who wanted it to mean cultural critique and not scientific explanation of the nuts and bolts of imaging processes) do pertain in important ways to the conditions of perception and image, but in ways that would have to be subject to the defining *critical* structure and orientation of phenomenology of the Husserlian tradition. The explanation of social uses of photographs would have to pass through a rigorous critique of the 'natural attitudes' structuring such accounts of photographic perception before it would be philosophically, critically or historically useful to name them phenomenological.

These factors (as they occurred in the English language context) have to be considered in terms of the impact of translations of, largely, French and German critical

and philosophical discourse. The transformations in English language cultural criticism in the later 1960s and 1970s are readable as reactions to the waves of theory translated from French, especially, as these impacted on cultural discourse in ways that are highly condensed and almost simultaneous in some cases. Philosophical and critical innovations that occurred over a turbulent and fast moving period about forty years in France were, largely, translated and disseminated to find audiences ripe for new critical resources in the space of just a few years (the translation of early Merleau-Ponty, for instance, was very swiftly followed by that of his later work and these were published almost simultaneously with translations of texts that entailed apparently outright critical rejection of the bases of Merleau-Ponty's thought in the work of Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, to name just the most obvious).

Lastly, one should note that the period since the 1980s has been marked by something of a return to thematic concerns that might formally have been addressed in terms of phenomenological philosophy. However, given the twists and turns of critical and theoretical developments outlined here it is hardly surprising that in art historical terms (with a few notable exceptions) such phenomenon as the widespread return to 'work immanent analysis' and the subsequent desire for a theorisation of perception, in particular, have mostly eschewed formal articulation in terms of phenomenological philosophy though thus remaining indebted to particular terms, concepts and presuppositions that shape the works of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, in particular.

Why is a Merleau-Pontian Theorisation of Photography Appropriate in This Context?

Appeal to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty as a framework for understanding art practices has been made mainly in discussion of those practices for which this

philosophy has been influential as, for instance, with minimalism and performance art and their address to the experience of three-dimensionality and embodiment.[4] This philosophy has proven useful in critical attempts to understand these and other cultural practices that address issues of spatiality or that deploy the body in ways that seek to interrogate its modes of gestural expression. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has been and remains very suggestive for such research and such practices. In contrast, an attempt to construct a theory of photography on the basis of this philosophy must first of all address the fact that he did not write substantively on the topic. Indeed, when it is mentioned in his writings it is, invariably, in the negative.[5] This fact alone would seem to make such an approach appear counterintuitive or at least not as immediately suggestive as its use in attempts to understand other cultural forms. Furthermore, if this is a problem, it is made more emphatic when one recalls that Merleau-Ponty featured negatively as a figure whose work was rejected in the development of some the most interesting theories and practices of photography to emerge in the later twentieth century. For example, his phenomenological philosophy of perception and the cultural discourses it influenced were important as practices that were critically negated by

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[4] The most notable recent examples of extended critical studies for which Merleau-Ponty is an important resource are: Amelia Jones' *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, and, Alex Potts' *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000.

[5] Negative references to photography are to be found scattered throughout Merleau-Ponty's published writings. The most striking and significant examples are to be found in all three of his essays on art: "Le Doute de Cézanne", which was originally published in *Fontaine*, no. 47, in December 1945, then again in the collection *Sens et non-sens*, Paris: Nagel, 1948, and in English as "Cézanne's Doubt" in *Sense and Non Sense*, trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970; Le Langage Indirect et les Voix du Silence", was originally written in 1951 as part of a research project that was abandoned and only published posthumously as *La Prose du Monde*, Paris: Gallimard, 1969, and in English as *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neill, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973, later extracted from the abandoned manuscript and reworked for publication in two consecutive issues of *Les Temps Modernes*, (June and July of 1952), which were then brought together in his collection *Signes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1960, published in English as "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence", in *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964; "L'oeil et l'espirit" was written shortly before Merleau-Ponty's death and was first published in *Art de France*, no. 1, January 1961, then in a special edition of *Les Temps Modernes*, published to mark his death in October of the same year and three years later in book form, *L'oeil et l'espirit*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, published in English as "Eye and Mind" in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, trans. Carleton Dallery, ed. James M. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

semiotic theories of photography and the more aggressively rigorous practices of conceptual art. Not only was his work—specifically, on visual perception—rejected along with other theories of perception, but many of the theoretical resources that Marxist, Feminist, Semiotic and Psychoanalytical tendencies in photographic discourse later productively drew upon, themselves emerged in a cultural and intellectual context significantly shaped by rejection of the philosophical commitments and cultural presuppositions structuring Merleau-Ponty's work.[6]

Nevertheless, it is my contention that Merleau-Ponty's writings stand as the most credible basis upon which to model a critical response to the contemporary situation of photographic culture. Indeed, I would say that what at first appears to be most counterintuitive in this (the historically quixotic idea that what is currently needed is a Merleau-Pontian theory of photography) actually indicates something central to critical discourse on photography, albeit in a latent manner. The concerns that shaped Merleau-Ponty's work and the ideas he developed in response to these might be said to be very significant for current photography theory and photographic culture more broadly.

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[6] Perhaps the two most influential figures in this respect are Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida both of whom explicitly formed their intellectual projects, at least in part, by rejecting what they took Merleau-Ponty to stand for. Foucault asserted frequently that his project was explicitly conceived as a way out of the aporia generated by existentialist Marxism and phenomenology, which he conceived of as having "clearly acted as a screen and an obstacle" (Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power", in *Power / Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mapham and Kate Soper, ed. Colin Gordon, Harlow: Longman, 1980, p. 117). The significant historical event on this account is undoubtedly the upheaval of May 1968 and its impact of French intellectual culture. Derrida's relation to Merleau-Ponty is more intimate and more complex. Anecdotally, one can note that he was, for a while, supervised in his doctoral research by Merleau-Ponty (until the latter's sudden death in 1961) and that later he authored the comment: "I don't know what perception is and I don't believe that anything like perception exists" (as quoted in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970, p. 272). More explicitly, in defending his doctoral thesis, Derrida comments upon the importance of phenomenology for the development of his ideas but, "not—especially not—in the versions proposed by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, which were then dominant, but rather in opposition to them or without them", "The Time of A Thesis: Punctuations", *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore, London: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 38. It is not until 1990, with the publication of Derrida's, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, that Derrida explicitly addressed Merleau-Ponty's work. See also Bernard Charles Flynn's, "Textuality and the Flesh: Derrida and Merleau-Ponty", in the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 15, no. 2, May 1984, pp. 164-179.

These concerns are sedimented, so to speak, in the current state of photographic art discourse. For instance, what cultural specificity is gained in the rejection of the universalist theorisation of embodied experience is arguably marred by a fateful inability to understand embodiment as a pressing ontological problem for the ways culture mediates natural and social forms. The fact that such problems are currently addressed in terms of the general cultural implications of photographic art practices suggests that examination of this might have significantly wider implications and that these are particularly amenable to analysis in terms of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy insofar as its broad aim is to problematise such forms, albeit in different terms.

What Remains 'Unthought' *in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy?*

Merleau-Ponty had a rather distinctive way of writing his critical reflections on the work of others. As is often remarked in scholarly interpretations of his writings, this often entails the narratively confusing attempt to 'occupy' the text or body of work under consideration in order to bring out their complexities and aporia, such as in his late reading of Husserl's phenomenology, "The Philosopher and His Shadow". In this essay Merleau-Ponty writes: "At the end of Husserl's life there is an unthought-of element in his works which is wholly his and yet opens out on something else. To think is not to possess the objects of thought; it is to use them to mark out a realm to think about which we therefore are not yet thinking about". This is an insight borrowed directly from Heidegger, but what it means for any theorisation of culture on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's mode of reading is distinctive.[7] In light of this mode of reading it

[7] Merleau-Ponty "The Philosopher and His Shadow" (originally published in 1959 to mark the centenary of the birth of Husserl as "Le Philosophe et son ombre" in *Edmund Husserl 1859-1959*, eds., H.L. Breda and J. Taminaux, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959, and re-published the following year by

has to be admitted that the interpretations of Merleau-Ponty put forward in this thesis are quite brutal. This brutality stands out most in the way I read Merleau-Ponty's thought as offering a sense of intellectual productivity with regard to contemporary photographic culture. I believe, this admission notwithstanding, that what follows remains largely true to his notion of philosophy however, namely, that it be reflection, which takes seriously the demand to learn how to look at the world again. Merleau-Ponty offers a rich interrogation of thought defined as facing this, simultaneously, ontological and historical task. However, his philosophy also often disappoints this central ambition to think the forms of essence with and through those of existence.

The present study is quite conventional in that it finds its heuristic principle in Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of Heidegger's celebrated claim: "the greater the work accomplished [...] the richer the unthought-of-element in that work".[8] However, it differs from much recent Merleau-Ponty influenced scholarship precisely to the extent that it finds in his notions of aesthetic experience, embodiment and spatiality, sources of intellectual productivity which promise much for interpretation of culture, but that call for articulation at the levels of history and society and not those of logos and origin as these concepts are conventionally taken to characterise contemporary forms of sociality as a field of abstractly determined ethical intersubjectivity.

It remains the case, however, that the theoretically redemptive critical revision of the trajectory of photographic discourse over the period of the last thirty five or so years

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Merleau-Ponty in the collection, *Signes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1960, translated into English by Richard McCleary as *Signs*, Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 160. The quotation from Heidegger is taken from the lecture series, *Der Satz vom Grund*, Pfullington: Verlag Gunther Neske, 1957, p. 123-4.

The greater the works of a thinker—which in no way coincides with the breadth and number of his writings—the richer is what is unthought in this work, which means, that which emerges in and through this work as having not yet been thought. Of course this unthought has nothing to do with what a thinker has overlooked or not mastered which wiser descendents would then have to make good on.

Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*, 1991, trans. Reginald Lilly, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 71.

[8] Ibid., p.

that is suggested by the historical and theoretical viewpoints outlined above would, ultimately, remain limited if it did not aim at a general theorisation of the phenomenological conditions of photography, as such and for the present. It is this task that orients the discussion of photographic theory, photographic practices and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy which are pursued here. The broad aim is to reconsider the phenomenological theme of photographic temporality (central to critical discourse on photography) in terms of Merleau-Ponty's conception of existential spatiality; perhaps his most distinctive contribution to phenomenological discourse. My approach is oriented by the intuition that the two "halves" of this theoretical-historical conjunction—what one might call the totalising ambition of phenomenological generality as contrasted to the critical demand for sensitivity to the specifics of different cultural practices—will, more than likely, *not* map neatly onto each other, either in the form of a general account of photographic spatio-temporality, or, as a critical-historical account of photographic discourse remodelled according to phenomenological criteria. It is just this insistently problematic relation that promises to be critically productive.

The Structure of this Thesis

Chapter one attempts to clarify what it might mean to make the, perhaps, exaggerated claim that there is no extant, phenomenological discourse of photography by making emphatic a critical account of the only text that might compellingly fill this position, Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida*. This text is examined in light of the often misrecognised phenomenological impetus the stands as its orienting principle. Analysis of *Camera Lucida* as an explicit phenomenological project reveals its problematic status to derive from its assertion of a thoroughly eidetic and transcendental theorisation of

photographic experience according to a pure notion of the form of its temporality. The derivation of a range of Barthes's celebrated 'photographic concepts' are examined in terms of their relation to the phenomenological psychology of Jean Paul Sartre and their indebtedness to the eidetic phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. The manner in which Barthes constructs his account of photographic experience is taken to suggest the possibility of its critical refiguration in Merleau-Pontian terms that would enable more concrete and socio-historically articulated account of photography to be established on the general terrain of a phenomenology. The central theme of this analysis is the manner in which Barthes's rejection of the phenomenological category of intentionality entails a rejection of photographic art that places unwarranted conceptual limitations on what the concept 'art' might mean in the context.

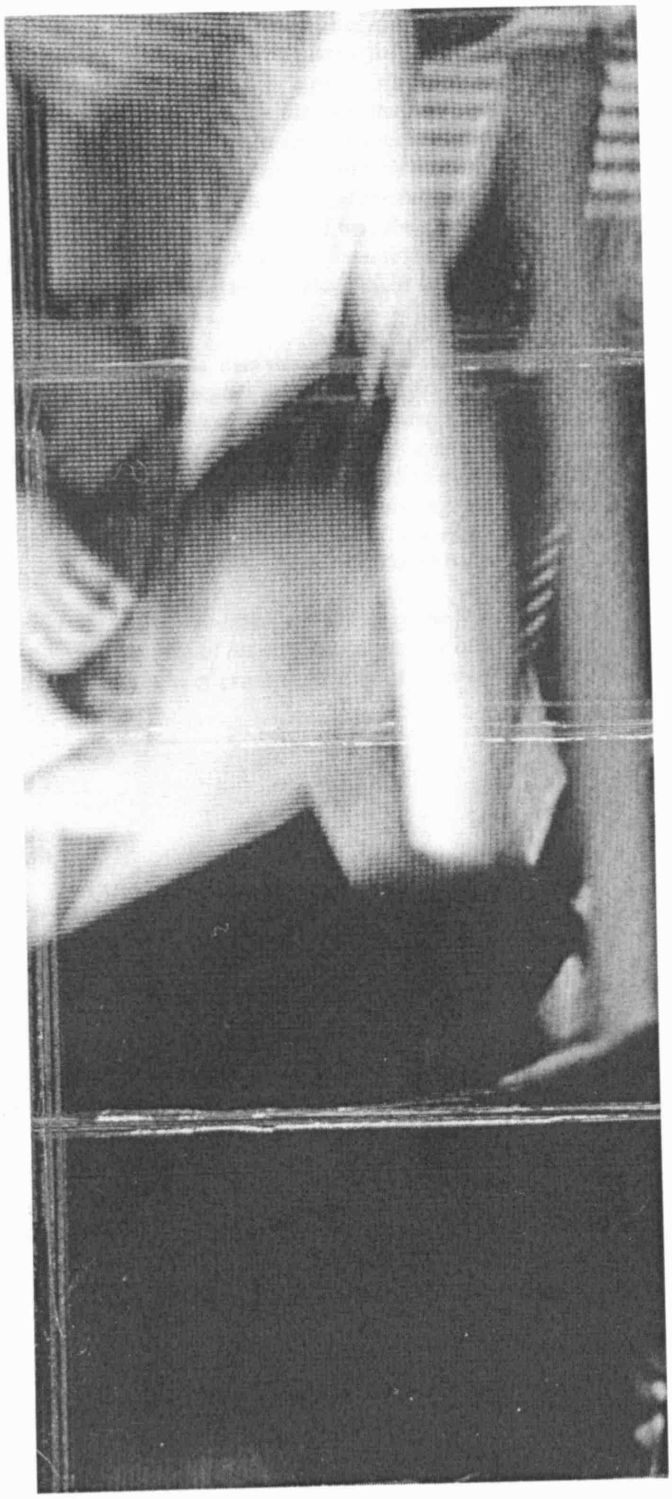
On the basis of these analyses, chapter two attempts to outline a Merleau-Pontian theorisation of photography. It does so through articulation of a critical account of the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics and his broader philosophical works have been taken up at various moments in recent cultural criticism. These analyses allow articulation of a broadened conception of 'art' in relation to the problematic notion of phenomenological intentionality and the categories of existential spatiality, technology and especially Merleau-Ponty's conception of the phenomenological practice of reflective reduction. This entails analysis of his treatment of photography as a reductive image form in both his writings on aesthetics and his wider philosophy. The analysis of these relations and conceptual problems allows articulation of a notion of a photographic art that can stand as performing a critical function in relation to what Merleau-Ponty describes as the threat of 'operational thinking', which is, here, taken to characterise the modes of reflection adopted by and in certain art practices such as those of Mel Bochner and Ketty La Rocca.

Chapters three and four take the central themes discussed in the previous two and attempts to articulate them in terms of two different artistic practices. Chapter three, focussing on the photographic works of Emilio Prini, takes his practice to be suggestive of a critical response to the complex problems of embodiment and photographic mediation discussed in chapters one and two. For all its value vis-avis problems of embodiment this project remains critically problematic when confronted with questions of embodiment and cultural experience of a more broadly social character. Chapter four examines Allan Sekula's attempt to articulate a specifically photographic art of socially critical documentary form as offering an existentially oriented, phenomenologically emphatic and yet socially reflexive model according to which one might consider the relevance and critical value of a phenomenological theorisation of photography.

This thesis has been produced in parallel with a body of artworks and together these comprise a programme of research pursued over the last five years. These art works relate to the themes and problems discussed in the thesis in a range of ways that are discussed in the section with which this thesis ends. One obvious relation that has shaped the production of artworks over this period should be noted here. This body of artworks comprises still images of various kinds, still images and video works that are similarly diverse in format and a range of other objects and texts. All of the works produced over this period have been oriented by the decision to use different processes, forms and approaches to examine different aspects of the production, dissemination and consumption of photography. It is to this extent that both aspects of this project address the same issues from a range of perspectives.

CHAPTER ONE

ROLAND BARTHES' EIDETIC PHENOMENOLOGY OF PHOTOGRAPHY



Andrew Fisher, *The living dead*, 2003-4.

He had the good and ill fortune to be photogenic; photographs of him filled the house: since there was no such thing as rapid exposure, he had acquired a taste for posing and holding his poses; everything was a excuse to freeze a gesture, to adopt a noble stance or to turn to stone; he relished those brief moments of eternity when he became his own statue. [...] *In the evening, when we went out to wait for him in the road we would soon spot him, in the crowd of travellers leaving the funicular railway, because of his great height and his dancing masters walk. However far off he saw us, he used to 'strike an attitude', as if at the behest of some invisible photographer* [...] *At this signal, I used to freeze, lean forward, I was the sprinter about to take off, the little bird that pops out of the camera; we would remain for a few seconds, face to face, a pretty group in porcelain, then I would dash forward.*
Jean Paul Sartre, *Words*

Now, once I feel myself being observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing", I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image. [...] The Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity. [...] You are the only one who can never see yourself except as an image; you never see your eyes unless they are dulled by the gaze they rest upon the mirror or the lens [...] even and especially for your own body, you are condemned to the repertoire of images
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Yesterday his body lay under the police arc-lights at the foot of the flyover, veiled by a delicate lacework of blood. The broken postures of his legs and arms, the bloody geometry of his face, seemed to parody the photographs of crash injuries that covered the walls of his apartment.
J. G. Ballard, *Crash*

Camera Lucida and the Idea of a Phenomenology of Photography

It would not be overstating the case to claim that, since its publication in 1980 and translation into English in 1981—not least because of its success as a publication and the enormous amount of commentary it has inspired—Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida* has come to stand as the conventional model for consideration of the value and/or possibility of a phenomenological theorisation of photography. However, largely because of this, it remains highly controversial as does the idea it has come to stand in for.[1]

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[1] Roland Barthes, *La Chambre Claire: Note sur la Photographie*, Paris: Cahiers du Cinéma, Gallimard, Le Seuil, 1980; translated as *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill & Wang, 1981; & London: Jonathan Cape, 1982. This description does not

One important feature of recent interpretations of *Camera Lucida* has been an emphasis on the issues of embodiment and culture that Barthes addresses through the concepts of 'pose' and 'image repertoire'. These two concepts and the relation they describe have proven attractive to recent critics insofar as they promise a way to articulate a phenomenological supplement to discursive theorisations of cultural identity. For example, (to sketch some of the most convincing examples of this tendency in the English language context) Kaja Silverman has recently taken up Barthes' treatment of the theme of "image repertoire" in an attempt to characterise an ethics of psychoanalytically articulated intersubjectivity. She reads Barthes as providing a framework through which the Lacanian notion of 'screen' can be thought in a socially and historically concrete sense. Silverman articulates Barthes point in relation to the notion of the pose quite concisely: "The representational force which the pose exerts is so great that it radiates outward, and transforms the space around the body and everything which comes into contact with it into an imaginary photograph".[2] In a

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mean to claim *Camera Lucida* as the only extant text that deals with phenomenological issues in photography, rather, the point is that *Camera Lucida* stands for the explicit idea of a phenomenology of photography. One might add that, though much less well known, Hubert Damisch's occasional essays on photography are also deeply oriented by explicit phenomenological themes. Their critical approach stems from his early text, "Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image", first published in *Arc*, Paris: 1963 (predating *Camera Lucida* by some twenty years) and republished in English translation in *October* 5, Summer 1978. Damisch's later essays on photography refigure his early reflections on the topic in relation to *Camera Lucida* and are collected in *La Dénivelée: À l'épreuve de la photographie*, Paris: Éditions Seuil, 2001. As far as I have been able to ascertain, most of these later essays have not been translated into English but they have been rendered into German in *Hubert Damisch, Fixe Dynamik: Dimensionen des Photograhpischen*, Berlin: Diaphanes, 2004.

[2] See Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996, especially pp. 195-227; and Amelia Jones, "'The Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment", in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2002, pp. 947-78 The Lacanian framework that Jones and Silverman treat as being cognate with Barthes' notion of the photographic pose is, famously, expressed in terms of an anonymous and alienated form of externalised visual agency.

> In the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. [...] In the scopic field, everything is articulated between two terms that act in an antinomic way—on the side of things, there is the gaze, that is to say, things look at me, and yet I see them. [...] What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which [...] I am *photo-graphed*.

Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, 1964, p 106. The basic point of interest in remarking this relation is the correlation between the radiating character of the pose for Barthes

related but more eclectically structured fashion, Amelia Jones gives an account of critically staged forms of embodiment in recent art practices that draws upon the same set of concepts in "'The Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment", thus: "The screen defines the process through which we perform ourselves simultaneously as subjects and objects of looking; the photographic portrait can thus be viewed as a screen across and through which complex processes of identification and projection take place in an ongoing dynamic of subject formation or *subjectification*".[3]

However interesting in other respects such uses of these concepts may be, they tend to ignore the problematic sense in which Barthes' phenomenology of photography

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and the anonymous and inhuman form of agency that structures what the gaze means for Lacan. For Barthes, the enigmatic and external agency at work is structured according to Sartre's notion of the forms of emanation that cathect images with desire. Silverman develops a Lacanian account of these themes in terms of Barthes appropriation of the notion of image repertoire through discussion of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*.

> [The gaze is] the 'unapprehensible' agency thorough, which we are socially ratified or negated as spectacle. It is Lacan's way of stressing that we depend upon the other not only for our meaning and our desires, but also for our very confirmation of self. To 'be' is in effect to 'be seen'. [...] The screen is not only 'on' the bodies of the women Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* showcase, but also 'inside' us. Moreover, although the look is not the gaze, nevertheless, we must collectively assume at least partial responsibility for the terms under which the latter 'photographs' the world. [...] The screen or cultural image-repertoire inhabits each of us, much as language does. What this means is that when we apprehend another person or an object, we necessarily do so via that large, diverse, but ultimately finite range of representational co-ordinates which determine what and how the members of our culture see—how they process visual detail, and what meaning they give it. [...] The full range of representational co-ordinates which are culturally available at a particular moment in time constitute what I have been calling the 'screen' and those which propose themselves with a certain inevitability the 'given-to-be-seen'.

Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, p. 133. The notion of the screen stands as an obvious figure for generalised social conditions of alienation or overdetermination. One might say that, for very good reasons, it has proven attractive precisely to the extent that it promises to avoid perceived problems with the language of alienation and overdetermination. One might also say that it seems to have simply replicated these problems at a different level of abstraction. The undeniable intellectual productivity of this theoretical move does tend towards granting a rather unreflexive privilege to a certain sense of 'culture' as an effectively unacknowledged universal condition that determines processes of individuation in the face of plural and conflicted social processes. This is a problem that also registers in Jones's article.

[3] Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, p. 203. The passage from which this second quotation is taken reads in full:

> Exaggerating their own performance of themselves, these artists, then, explore the capacity of the self-portrait photograph to foreground the "I" as other to itself, the artistic subject as "taking place" in the future through interpretive acts that bring him or her back to life via memory and desire. [...] The screen defines the process through which we perform ourselves simultaneously as subjects and objects of looking; the photographic portrait can thus be viewed as a screen across and through which complex processes of identification and projection take place in an ongoing dynamic of subject formation or *subjectification*.

Amelia Jones, "'The Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and* Society, vol. 27, no. 4, 2002, p. 950.

posits an eidetic notion of temporality (i.e., a pure notion of the essential characteristics of this form of experience) as characterising the mediated relations between the body and its cultural milieu. The incipient idealism of Barthes late theorisation of photography would have to be seen as an unwelcome association in this context as it can give no account of the forms of mediation involved and tends in its notion of identity towards the hypostatisation of a moment of intrinsic otherness with no social or historical 'texture'. Much of what is problematic in the sense Barthes gives the concepts of pose and image repertoire derives from the almost entirely formalised notion of temporality that his inquiry into the essence of photography asserts as determining. What is problematic here can perhaps be expressed by noting the strange sense in which *Camera Lucida* has become attractive to theorisations of discursively constructed difference when it is explicitly constituted as an inquiry into transcendental essence. The confidence with which such critical discourse appropriates these concepts as separable from Barthes' phenomenological idealism is fundamentally misplaced as this would seem to carry over a theoretical weakness in the face of the demand to characterise the form of temporality they are thus indebted to. Phenomenology as a supplement, articulated on the basis of such de-contextualised conceptual resources is a misleading project. One distinct problem would be, from what standpoint is a phenomenology of photographic experience possible or desirable in this light?

The epigrams to this chapter articulate some of these conceptual relations. In the first, Sartre describes an affectionate childhood game in which his relationship to his grandfather is figured through the public pretence of posing for a photograph; the young Sartre acting the role of photographer and the grandfather his rather uninhibited subject. Their intimacy registers in this spontaneous but familiar and repeated mime and Sartre's recollection extends through a set of photographic associations in different material and

social registers. One of these is the way that the older man's vanity connects his unselfconscious public acts to the private realm of the house filled with photographic likenesses of the older man remembered from the point of view of Sartre's maturity. This is an image of a remembered set of social relationships that extend over different kinds of action and traverse the different spaces that envelop and connect them. Sartre's literary image of this mime quite literally informs the second quotation, which is what Barthes makes of the relation between photographer, camera and subject. He refigures the exemplary situation of posing in more photographically specific terms (but also more generically) as a profoundly isolating moment that marks the social character of photography out as a form of alienation. Being the focus of the attention of someone wielding a camera entails becoming other to oneself in a very particular manner that, he claims, is exemplary of the alienated forms of mass cultural modernity. Indeed, on this view, to pose in this way is to take up and to inhabit one or other pre-determined formation of identity. It is his attempt to refigure this relation that has proven attractive to recent, discursively framed accounts of encultured embodiment. But this moment of his account of photographic experience is entwined, famously, with the way that Barthes describes emotive experiences of certain photographs that puncture and exceed the cultural formalisation of identity. His account of these possible states of specificity and significance depends upon a radicalisation of conventional notions of photographic realism, so that the category of evidence is transformed into a transcendental condition for the specificity of cultural value as such.

To add to these biographical and quasi-biographical images of such basic and familiar photographic situations, the quotation from J. G. Ballard's novel *Crash* is offered, tentatively, in response to Barthes abosolutisation of photographic realism and as a possible critical alternative to the temporal pressures he places on photographic

adoption of Barthes notions of the pose and image repertoire. The report given by the quasi fictional narrator, Ballard, on seeing the charismatic Vaughan's body splayed on the roadside and his memory of the sexually charged environment of an apartment filled with photos of crash victims is, in this context and despite the contrast in emotive charge, not so easily divorced or even so distant from Sartre's description of his grandfather's public persona and their family home.

Many of the issues raised in critical discourse on *Camera Lucida* bear upon the extent to which it articulates, in a more or less strict fashion, a phenomenology of photography. Its critics have asked whether it actually presents a 'theory' of photography at all or if it says anything interesting about mass cultural modernity. Barthes does raise many interesting issues regarding photographic culture but these often remain implicit in their articulation and his perspective on contemporaneous cultural form appears to be overwhelmed by the particular manner in which he asserts boredom as the overdetermining existential condition of mass media.[5] Others have

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[5] Victor Burgin gives an account of Barthes boredom, in positive terms, under the name of *acedia* ("Lassitude, inertia, torpor; a body become soporific, soft, limp; a loss of reality, a porosity to the strangeness of the world, a hallucinatory vivacity of sensations. A 'very special way of being in the world', known for centuries of Western Christianity as acedia—a state of mortal sin", "Barthes' Discretion", in *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes*, p. 27). Burgin reads Barthes' acedia as a somnambulant and vaguely eroticised kind of flaneurship and as the last resort of a cultural critic in the face of "the secular world order of Western capitalism" (Ibid.). He claims that Barthes' takes up acedia's traditional sense of mortal sin as a way of destabilising the hierarchical order of things as he loosely gathers them together in literary reports on disconnected affective states. By way of contrast, Patrick Maynard's *The Engine of Visualisation: Thinking Through Photography*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997, attempts to develop a self-consciously philosophical theory of photography that totally rejects *Camera Lucida* (as well as, effectively, Barthes earlier writings) on the grounds that they do not really present what one could call a theory. A significant amount of recent attempts to produce an explicitly 'philosophical' account of photography have framed themselves in relation to *Camera Lucida* (amongst other canonical photographic theory texts) in more or less interesting ways. Maynard's is perhaps the most substantial recent contribution to this genre from an 'Analytic' perspective. One can also note Jonathan Friday, *Aesthetics and Photography*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002, and Mary Price, *The Photograph: A Strange Enclosed Space*, Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1994. All of these contributions have a rather restrictive notion of what philosophy as an intellectual enterprise might be, what this means for its relation to culture and, specifically, other modes of cultural criticism that have dealt with the object of their enquiry. This colours the treatment they meet out to already existing attempts to theorise photography, such as *Camera Lucida*, which have tended to emerge from markedly interdisciplinary intellectual spheres. A sophisticated treatment of photography, dealing explicitly with cultural criticism's relation to philosophy as a problem for any projected philosophical account of

either celebrated or condemned this essay's "novelistic" and quasi-autobiographical mode of testimony and the formal sophistication of its performative claim on interdisciplinary modes of writing. These traits are, indeed, what Barthes offers in place of explicit theorisation and they present distinct problems regarding the relationship between the form of writing adopted and his general aim to conceptualise the specifics of affective immediacy.[6] *Camera Lucida* has also stimulated much discussion of what relation it bears to Barthes' earlier work and whether its phenomenological influences contradict these. In it, he certainly does seem to revoke many of his earlier critical commitments, such as can be seen in the shifting values attribute to the 'magical' as a figure of photographic meaning in his oeuvre.[7] Other commentators have mentioned, but relatively few have examined in detail, the fact of *Camera Lucida's* dedication to Sartre's phenomenological psychology of the imagination, *L'Imaginaire*, of 1940. This dedication appears odd given that Barthes' writings were part of broader intellectual developments taken by many to render Sartre's existentialism obsolete, (or at the very least distinctly unfashionable) long before the time of *Camera Lucida's* writing.[8]

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photographic theory, (which does concern itself in detail with *Camera Lucida*) is Peter Osborne's, "Sign and Image", in *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 20-52.

[6] Perhaps the most thoroughgoing, full length study in English that examines the theme of intertextuality in *Camera Lucida* is Nancy Shawcross's: *Roland Barthes on Photography: The Critical Tradition in Perspective*, Gainesville, Florida: University Press of Florida, 1997.

[7] Perhaps the critic who has spent most time examining this is Victor Burgin, whose relation to Barthes is intimate but oriented towards his earlier semiotics, especially as methodologically articulated in *The Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers & Colin Smith, New York: Hill and Wang, 1967. Given the centrality of Barthes' semiotics and later post-structuralism for Burgin, *Camera Lucida* seems to remain something of a thorn in his theoretical side, the act of worrying at which he has returned to regularly. See Burgin's, "Re-reading *Camera Lucida*" in *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*, ed. Victor Burgin, London: Macmillan, 1986.

[8] See, for instance, Colin MacCabe's comment on this point:

> Barthes' final work on photography finds in the image arguments that are in direct contradiction with the major theses and themes of his earlier work [...] *Camera Lucida* not only dedicates itself to Sartre's *L'Imaginaire* but presupposes as its method a traditional phenomenology in which Barthes takes his reaction to photographs as the fundamental given of his study. This phenomenology is justified by a prior assessment that it is impossible to separate a photograph from its referent. Barthes makes almost no argument for this. More surprisingly, he simply ignores *arguments that refuse the photograph any privileged relation to the referent* and instead analyse it within systems of connotation and signification that provide it with its meaning. The surprise stems from the fact Barthes himself most tellingly articulated such arguments from *Mythologies* onward [My emphasis].

MacCabe, "Barthes and Bazin", in Jean Michel Rabaté (ed.), *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, p. 73. Here, MacCabe offers more than a concise

experience.[4] One can note that Ballard's treatment of photography in this novel unfolds as a concern for problems of realism and desire as these characterise the possibilities of a life that is metaphorically, literally and perversely shaped by technology. But even at its most perverse (in the face of a wilfully anticipated and photographically fêted death) Ballard's novel articulates modes of temporality in terms of the social forms through which they have already become concrete for characters attempting to understand their role in this process of concretion. Thus, *Crash* remains quite close to the critical sense of Barthes' account of mass cultural form in *Camera Lucida*. But, whilst Barthes' account of photographs tends to limit itself to a narrow range of objects and situations and to assert as ideal the kinds of pastness involved in the experience of these, *Crash* offers a parallel thematisation of the photograph as categorially shaped by a concern for the future as a problematical possibility of the present. This temporal mode is figured fictionally and the indeterminate term of fiction that can be discerned here will turn out to be an important form, or level, of organisation in the analysis that follows. In this sense, the perversity of Ballard's photographically mediated social relations shares something of the orientation of *Camera Lucida* whilst remaining close to Sartre's articulation of photography as a complex of acts that span concrete sites and practices of social life. There is something of a connection between the first and third epigrams to this chapter that cannot be accounted for, I would argue, through a straightforward

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[4] I think here of Ballard's claim regarding what is at issue in the relation between realism and invention in literature as phrased in his introduction to this novel:

> The marriage of reason and nightmare that has dominated the 20th century has given birth to an ever more ambiguous world. Across the communications landscape move the spectres of sinister technologies and the dreams that money can buy. [...] Increasingly, our concepts of past, present and future are being forced to revise themselves. [...] We have annexed the future into the present, as merely one of those manifold alternatives open to us. [...] In addition, I feel that the balance between fiction and reality has changed significantly in the past decades. Increasingly their roles are reversed. [...] We live inside an enormous novel. It is now less necessary for the writer to invent the fictional content of his novel. The fiction is already there. The writer's task is to invent the reality.

J. G. Ballard, *Crash*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1973, p. 4. For Ballard, the reality presupposed by literary realism and existing social forms presents pressing problems, but in effect remains to be invented. In this context, the lived present is itself a form of dystopian science fiction that is legible in terms of the technical forms taken by technologically mediated desire.

It remains the case, however, that all of these questions have tended to be addressed in ways that either accept as unproblematic Barthes' idea of a phenomenology of photography—often because it is loose enough in structure to facilitate co-option to some other set of interests—or that take its undoubtedly problematic character as exhausting the form and critical value of what phenomenological analysis might be able to say about photography.[9] Neither response is adequate as the former tends to assert a rather cynical relation between phenomenological categories and modes of cultural experience and the latter has proven fatefully unable to eradicate the very desire for a phenomenological account of photography that it would deny. In this light, it would seem that *Camera Lucida* calls for yet another critical description, but this time one that would explicitly characterise its phenomenological aspect as central to the idea of photography it presents.

Asking himself the question: "Why mightn't there be, somehow, a new science for each object? A *mathesis singularis* (and no longer universalis)?", Barthes sets out to discover what the essence of photography is through a set of forty eight short, essayistic meditations that are thematically connected and organised into two sections.[10] The first

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description of what is at issue in this relation. He foregrounds a key presupposition on Barthes' part (and one that is also assumed by most critics of the phenomenological impetus of *Camera Lucida*): that the proper topic for a phenomenological account of photography would have to be articulated in terms of a particularised viewer facing the task of giving an account of the *privilege* granted an immediate connection they would seem to be committed to thinking they have with what is depicted in the photograph, thus encouraging the radicalisation of the notional referent of the image, affirming the idea that it exhausts photography's phenomenological operations and divorcing phenomenological analysis from problems of signification.

[9] The latter interpretation is exemplified by John Tagg's influential account of photographic *histories* according to the Foucauldian notion of discursive formation and the Althusserian account of ideological interpolation in *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories*, Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988. By far the most striking example of the former kind of reading that I am aware of is given by Michael Fried in his, "Barthes' *Punctum*", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 3, Spring 2005, pp. 539-74, which finds little more in Barthes than justification for his own, rather tendentious, notion of the anti-theatrical, absorptive image for which photography is interesting only to the extent that it has lately come, in some hands, to mimic painting.

[10] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 8. In coining the term *mathesis singularis* (after reporting his resolve to, "start my inquiry with no more than a few photographs, the ones I was sure existed for me", ibid.), Barthes makes a direct contrast with Husserl's appropriation of the Leibnizian concept *mathesis universalis*; by which Husserl announces a critical revision of phenomenology in the direction of a

of these articulates a quite laconic report on a series of phenomenological reflections, which are oriented by an insistence that the writer's own emotion should act as a guide through photographic culture, leading his reflections "from photograph to photograph".[11] This commitment structures Barthes' response to other, more 'conventional' approaches to the theoretical and historical study of photography in opposition to which the inquiry is organised.[12] From the start, the narrative foregrounds the existential characteristics of photography, defining it as a distinct image form by radicalising the idea of 'necessary reference' that a photographic negative or print are supposed to make to a unique event (which had to have unfolded before the camera in order for the image they bear to have been produced): "The first thing I found was this. What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph

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universal ontology that would stand as, "the systematic unity of all conceivable a priori sciences, but on a new foundation which overcomes 'dogmatism' through the use of the transcendental phenomenological method", (Edmund Husserl, "'Phenomenology', Edmund Husserl's Article for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1927)", trans. Richard E. Palmer, *Husserl: Shorter Works*, eds. Peter McCormick & Frederick A. Elliston, Notre Dame, Indiana & Brighton: University of Notre Dame Press & Harvester Press, 1981, p. 32. See Joseph Kockelmans' discussion of the ambiguities in Husserl's reference to Leibniz in this article and its meaning for the project of transcendental phenomenology, *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*, West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, pp. 252-261.). Something of this universal ambition abides, paradoxically and intentionally in Barthes' inversion of the term: for all its focus on singularity this theory of photography is oriented towards a sense of specificity as universal essence. Husserl's phenomenological ontology was intended to provide foundations for all objects of formal, material and regional ontologies, i.e., of knowledge as such. That Barthes projects his notion of the phenomenology of photography into a register that shares such an orientation is made clear by his radicalisation of the notion of specificity. He eschews the path of a regional ontology, as is made clear by his statements about the modes of inquiry he did not pursue: "Of course I could make out in Photography, in a very orthodox manner, a whole network of essences: material essences (necessitating the physical, chemical, optical study of Photography), and regional essences (deriving, for instance, from aesthetics, from History, from sociology)". It is less clear that he manages to avoid the problems this approach raises for his path to formal and transcendental analysis, as he goes on to claim it might: "but at the moment of reaching the essence of Photography in general, I branched off; instead of following the path of a formal ontology (of a Logic), I stopped, keeping with me, like a treasure, my desire or my grief" (*Camera Lucida*, p. 21). In this context, Barthes' allusion to Husserl is to be taken loosely, whilst acknowledging that this gesture characterises his phenomenology of the photograph and thus of cultural modernity.

[11] Ibid., p. 60.

[12] Barthes references to other genres and specific texts in *Camera Lucida* are highly allusive. His reference materials are, as is often mentioned in commentary, not included in the book's English translation whilst being listed in the French original, (pp. 185-90). They include, most substantially, the book's dedication and range of references to Sartre's, *L'Imaginaire*, Paris: Gallimard, 1940, translated as *The Imaginary: A Phenomenological Psychology of the Imagination*, trans. Jonathan Webber, London and New York: Routledge, 2004. They also include allusions to Giselle Freund's influential social history of photography (*Photography & Society*, London: Fraser, 1980) and Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of attitudes to photography (*Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990).

mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially. In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else".[13]

The account of photographic experience developed in light of these commitments centres on the emotive resonances of a restricted selection of images and, as indicated above, this is linked with an account of Barthes' own experience of being photographed. His reflections concentrate on the phenomenology of technically mediated desire as it shapes experience of certain images and as this is informed by his embodied response to being situated by the camera. Thus it is that photography is something one "undergoes": "The Photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" and that this dissociation is generalised according to the idea that viewing images of others is coloured by the experience of having been, oneself, subjected to this situation. These relations are figured through a range of metaphors (the root relation of spectrum and spectatorship with spectre, for instance) that enable him to characterise photographs as inherently deathly and to use this aura of deathliness to characterise the mode of pastness that he takes to suffuse the act of looking at photographs. Thus it is that, in light of the claim, "Now, once I feel myself being observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing", I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image", Barthes asserts of a photograph of another that; "Death is the

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[13] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 4. Here, one can anticipate the difference between event and object as posited by Barthes and Merleau-Ponty with regard to where the photograph sends the gaze of its viewer and how it is thought to do so. For Merleau-Pony photographs transport one elsewhere (illegitimately) because they don't establish any perceptual conditions that could root one's experience in the location of viewing or in the relation between image-object and body. For Barthes, they are thought of as co-extensive with their objects, but only insofar as the two sides of the relation share the characteristics of a bare form of eventhood. The emphasis he places on the temporal form of such eventuality encourages Barthes not to think of the phenomenological event in question in the spatial terms that seem no less intrinsic to the categories he goes on to develop.

eidos of that Photograph".[14] These reflections are entwined, in the register of photography's status as a visual form, with an assertion as to the centrality of photographic ostension: "the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of "Look", "See", "Here it is"; it points a finger at a certain *vis-à-vis*, and cannot escape this pure deictic language".[15] It is on the basis of these reflections that Barthes derives his widely celebrated notions of the *studium* and *punctum*, which respectively signify the field of banal culture determined by instrumental forms of intentionality and the kind of emotional event that might possibly irrupt from this sphere, punctuating and puncturing

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[14] Ibid., p. 10 & p. 15, respectively. An avenue of phenomenological inquiry into the aural experience of being photographed is suggested and not really pursued by Barthes in the passage following this first claim: "For me the Photographer's organ is not his eye (which terrifies me) but his finger", and the sound of the shutter release is the focus of this thought; "the only thing—to which my desire clings, their abrupt click breaking through the mortiferous layer of the Pose", which leads Barthes to reflect, suggestively but all too briefly, on older forms of camera technology "cameras [...] were clocks for seeing" (ibid.). The concatenated images of death, the quasi-automatic assumption of posing as an anxious anticipatory-pastness that splits photographic culture between being photographed and seeing photographs of others, and the environmental considerations of seeing, being seen and hearing are artfully extended in Hubert Damisch's, "The Unnegotiable", (*L'Intraitable, Das Unverhandelbare*; an essay on *Camera Lucida* written after Barthes death). He describes reading *Camera Lucida* at the end of the 1980s at the same time as remembering an earlier colloquium with Barthes at which Damisch tried to take a photograph of him. Unbeknownst to Damisch his film was poorly loaded and the photograph not exposed, but another was there to photograph this scene from behind. This photograph was later sent to Damisch, who was struck by a hint of an enigmatic smile on Barthes' face: "[It was] a photograph that showed me with a my eye to the viewfinder of a tiny camera [...] and opposite, that same Roland Barthes with the beginnings of a smile, I could not say from where it came". The photograph might show Barthes smiling in forbearance of a colleague who has coerced him into being photographed in full knowledge of his dislike for the situation or as having a premonition that "this little game between us would remain without consequences". This possible premonition revolves around the unaccustomed sound of the shutter release not functioning properly, which as Damisch realises on seeing the picture, might have released the poser from his unease. In a nicely constitutive irony this latter picture, as well as 'showing' Damisch this, also makes it clear that neither he nor Barthes could see it at the time. Both of their gazes were tied up in their bodily comportment towards production of the failed image. See, *Fixe Dynamik*, p. 15 (my translation). To supplement Damisch's narrative and in light of the fact that most of Barthes' source materials were photographs printed in the pages of magazine supplements, one might wonder why he did not explore (in auratic and tactile terms) the phenomenological and metaphoric resonance of readerly experience. One might frame such experience in terms of having and using one's fingers to turn pages as a corollary to the finger action he takes to be defining for his relation to the photographer. I think here of the feeling and the sound of licking one's finger to turn the stiff, glossy pages of a magazine and the fact that the sounds generated would accompany and frame the act of looking (perhaps encouraging one to treat it as a mode of *bodily* comportment accompanied by sharp noises of the pages being turned). One might extend this image a little further by noting that in such situations one's fingers do tend to get dirty as ink from each consecutive image (only loosely secured to the gloss surface of the paper) rubs off to leave a gradually accumulating residue of all the images viewed in the form of an inky smudge on the digit used to present them to view.

[15] Ibid., p. 5.

it with specific affective value.[16] Most famously, the central figures of this irruptive emotional value are first thought of in terms of the details scattered around the surfaces of photographs by dint of the lens' ambivalence towards what it is positioned in front of it. This first characterisation of the detail as that which carries a *punctum* effect is important. Firstly, Barthes takes it to be a locus of meaning that is formally liminal and thus almost exclusively perceptually subliminal. Secondly, he takes the proliferation of details in photographs to be a function of the camera and not of the photographer's manifest intent (that is, not as an expression of their concern for composition but as an excess of detail that enters into the photograph despite any manifest intent on the part of its producers). Importantly, his account of the detail-*punctum* reveals the central object of critique in *Camera Lucida* to be intentionality in its different photographic and existential registers. In fact, his account of the detail signals that *Camera Lucida* is a phenomenological project that seeks to dissolve the conventional phenomenological notion of intentionality.[17] As Nancy Shawcross has it: "Barthes associates the

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[16] The *studium* is introduced in the following manner:

> The first [element of the photograph], obviously, is an extent, it has the extension of a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture; this field can be more or less stylised, more or less successful, depending on the photographer's skill or luck, but it always refers to a classical body of information [...] Thousands of photographs consist of this field, and in those photographs I can, of course, take a kind of general interest, but in regard to them my emotion requires the rational intermediary of an ethical or political culture. What I feel from these photographs derives from an *average* affect [...] I do not know a French word which might account for this kind of human interest, but I believe the word exists in Latin: it is *studium*, which doesn't mean, at least not immediately, "study", but application to a thing, taste for someone, a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment, of course, but without special acuity. It is by *studium* that I am interested by so many photographs [...] for it's culturally [...] that I participate in the figures, the faces, the gestures, the settings, the actions.

Ibid., pp. 25-6. The punctum describes that which, "will break (or punctuate) the studium": the irruption of an involuntary affect that signals specificity, a transfiguration of what is anyone's into one's ownmost.

> The second element will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who will seek it out [...] it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me. A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many *points*. The second element that will disturb the *studium* I shall therefore call *punctum*; for *punctum* is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).

Ibid., pp. 26-7.

[17] It is necessary to stress that Barthes seeks to indicate a realm of affective experience, which is dependant upon and emerges from such intentional life. Though *Camera Lucida* is oriented towards a

'mechanical' photograph as being without culture and sees the photographic paradox as that which 'makes an inert object into a language and which transforms the non-culture of a 'mechanical' art into the most social of institutions'".[18]

The second part of *Camera Lucida* presents a more general meditation on the paradoxical character of photographic temporality as figured in terms of loss and remembrance. Here, paradoxical photographic time is taken to be exemplary of the period of writing, both in a personal and historical sense. Indeed, the categories "personal" and "historical" are, to a large extent, collapsed into one another as a phenomenological problem.[19] This broadened account of photographic time is directed towards a special case of the existential-ontological problem of the constitutively

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Nietzschean and Bataillean thematics of ecstatic experience, the narrative through which he approaches these themes relies upon the determinate negation of certain forms of intentionality. In this context, it would be well to bear in mind the definition of intentionality and the scope of the concept as articulated by Husserl, which is basically what is put into question:

> The terminological expression, deriving from Scholasticism, for designating the basic character of being as consciousness, as consciousness of something, is *intentionality*. In unreflective holding of some object or other in consciousness, we are turned or directed out towards it: our "*intentio*" goes out towards it. The phenomenological reversal of our gaze shows that this "being directed" [*Gerichtetsein*] is really an immanent essential feature of the respective experiences involved; they are "intentional" experiences.

Husserl, "'Phenomenology', Edmund Husserl's Article for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*", p. 33. Barthes takes the definition of intentionality from the Husserlian tradition as being descriptive of cultural experience and he seeks to conceptualise a form of specificity that shatters or transforms it. That he figures desire as being in excess of intentionality and this latter in terms of a specific socio-historical form is one of the most interesting aspects of *Camera Lucida*. Nevertheless, that he collapses the notion of artful intent (a photographer 'putting something in' a picture on purpose) with the basic directedness and the situated character of consciousness remains problematic in many respects. Michael Fried's description of this anti-intentional aspect of *Camera Lucida* is accurate:

> The *punctum*, we might say, is *seen* by Barthes but not because it has been *shown* to him by the photographer, for whom it does not exist; as Barthes recognizes, 'it occurs [only] in the field of the photographed thing', which is to say that it is a pure artefact of the photographic event—'the photographer could not *not* photograph the partial object at the same time as the total object' is how Barthes phrases it—or, perhaps more precisely, it is an artefact of the encounter between the product of that event and one particular beholder, in the present case, Roland Barthes.

Michael Fried, "Barthes' *Punctum*", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 31, no. 3, Spring 2005, p. 546. The generality of what is to be revealed by phenomenological reflection in this case is thus limited, or compromised, when viewed in terms of its object (the ubiquity of photography as the mainstay of contemporaneous mass culture), but the location of desiring excess over that which is intended in the relation between a cultural-technical form and affect is what has generally nonetheless been taken to be promising as a figure for affective specificity as such.

[18] Nancy Shawcross, *Roland Barthes on Photography*, p. 26. The Barthesian text she quotes from is, *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard, New York: Hill & Wang, 1977, p. 20.

[19] As Barthes puts it: "Is History not simply that time when we were not born? [...] Thus, the life of someone whose existence has somewhat preceded our own encloses in its particularity the very tension of History, its division. History is hysterical: it is constituted only if we consider it, only if we look at it—and in order to look at it, we must be excluded from it. As a living soul, I am the very contrary of History". *Camera Lucida*, pp. 64-5.

enigmatic experience of the death of another. The narrative extends the conceptual reach of photographic temporality as discussed in part one and it lays more general claim to time as the essence of photography: "There exists another *punctum* [...] than the 'detail. This new punctum is no longer of form but of intensity, is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (*'that-has-been*), it's pure representation".[20] That this inquiry is concerned with the photographic resurrection of Barthes' recently dead mother renders it deeply sentimental and has encouraged much confused commentary.[21] This confusion, largely, centres on the famously withheld "Winter Garden" photograph (showing *mere* Barthes as a child). One might describe the character of this confusion by noting that a large percentage of commentary on *Camera Lucida* stresses the

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[20] Ibid., p. 96.

[21] Barthes writes: "I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly, engaging it in an effort of description which will always miss its point of effect, the *punctum*", *Camera Lucida*, p. 53. This remark is made in discussion of his famous and hotly contested reflections on the detail of a pearl necklace, ambiguously presented as if seen or remembered in a photograph of an African American family photographed by James Van der Zee in Harlem, New York in the 1920s (published in, James Van der Zee, Owen Dodson & Camille Billops, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, New York: Dobbs Ferry, 1978). Much argument has centred on Barthes' account of this detail, which does not seem to actually exist in the photograph (an ambiguity that is exacerbated by the poor quality of its reproduction in *Camera Lucida*). The fact that the woman Barthes says is wearing the necklace actually doesn't, has been taken to support a range of views on the *punctum* effect, whether this is thought to explode the concept's lack of concrete facticity and to support accusations that it is a form of radical relativism, or to reveal something like a psychoanalytically articulated process of displacement and enigmatically deferred reference. These debates are discussed with a slightly odd mixture of empirical historicism and psychoanalysis by Margaret Olin in her essay, "Touching Photographs: Roland Barthes' 'Mistaken' Identification", in *Representations*, no. 80, Fall 2002, pp. 99-118. Asking the question, "Something had to be in front of the camera. Does it matter what?" (p. 99), Olin remarks that it never occurred to her that she was to take the Winter Garden photograph or the discovery of various punctii by Barthes to be empirically straightforward. She proceeds to draw out a range of linkages to other images and Barthes' other late writings (such as *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*) and to trace out the ways in which memory and the forms of its reportage can be 'mistaken'. Olin thinks that, rather than being devastating for Barthes argument, this ambiguity makes it more interesting (though in a critically attenuated fashion) insofar as it problematises his all too simple assumption of the indexical character of photographic reference. Thus, she writes:

> If the *punctum* is displaced, like an alibi, then the detail that is not there, the 'That-has-been', never was. And neither was the indexical power of the photograph. The fact that something was before the camera when the photograph was taken is no longer unproblematically the source of the photograph's power. [...] The fact that something is in front of the camera matters; what that something is does not. What matters is displaced.

Olin, "Touching Photographs", p. 112. If one thinks of such displacement as working upon latent possibilities that are only ever problematically locatable in time and space, then the psychoanalytical understanding of such phenomenon that Olin promotes is clearly not the only way of thinking about them. This is signalled by what—given the emphasis on intertextuality, has to be thought of as the surprisingly little remarked fact—that in-between the direct apprehension and the memory Barthes describes stands the mediating term of writing one's reflection upon the relationship they share to the object.

sophistication of its intertextual literary constructions at every point but this one and that, given this context, the extent to which Barthes' discussion of the image of his mother is taken quite so literally is distinctly odd. Pathos saturates this part of the discussion. It is mobilised as a general literary strategy. It gives tenor to his, often moving, eulogy for a lost parent and companion. It is also the conceptual core of the gesture towards theorising the ecstatic character of the existential condition of photography as a mass cultural form with which the book ends.

> Mad or tame? Photography can be one or the other: tame if its realism remains relative, tempered by aesthetic or empirical habits (to leaf through a magazine at the hairdresser's, the dentist's); mad if this realism is absolute and, so to speak, original, obliging the loving and terrified consciousness to return to the very letter of Time: a strictly revulsive movement which reverses the course of the thing, and which I shall call, the photographic *ecstasy*.[22]

Thus, paradoxically, death is asserted in material form as the core phenomenological category of lived experience, namely the temporality of photographic experience. The ecstatic character of authentic emotive experience in technological modernity is conceptualised as the enlivening irruption into lived time of the impossible-possibility of the living dead or the animated corpse.

Whilst it is undoubtedly rich with reflective insights and has a sophisticated literary form, *Camera Lucida* is a deeply problematic text. Its problems have found a register in the way it can be said to divide opinions of those involved in critical discourse on photography more than most other texts on the subject. One might situate this cultural divide along lines defined either by one's willingness to accept it's authenticity as testimony to the fate of technologically mediated emotional life, or by rejection of the subjective and sentimental manner in which this testimony unfolds its ontological claims.

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[22] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 119.

Camera Lucida's appeal to phenomenology, specifically, is often dismissed as an unfortunate symptom of Barthes' personal grief and this, in turn, has been taken as a sign of phenomenology's limitations with respect to thinking about photography. Such criticisms generally focus on Barthes' first person assertion of his emotional responses to an all too narrow selection of images and the fact that what he makes of these is instrumentally oriented to understanding the death of his mother. On this view, the literary form of authorisation supposed to ground the public relevance of Barthes' personalised claims shows, rather, that their generalisation is privative. The question is whether his account of photography and its attempt to redeem emotive life from the perceived banality of mass culture is exhausted by this sentimentalism.

In terms of what this question means for the articulation of aesthetic experience at a social level, Max Kozloff's 1981 review of *Camera Lucida's* English translation presents what has become a familiar criticism. Whilst Barthes' analyses take place ostensibly on the terrain of social relationships, Kozloff thinks they remain ultimately solipsistic in form and thus patrician in effect: "[Without] reasoning about the social and historical placement of its objects [...] there is a failure of empathy at the core of a book that stresses empathetic perception, and with that, a failure of aesthetic response as well".[23] In a related, but more strident vein, John Tagg criticises Barthes for seeking a "phenomenological guarantee" that would "give back" his mother; an overweening desire that collapses the institutional character of diverse historical discourses of photographic meaning into speculation on "a prior (though irretrievable) reality". The problem is that Barthes' desire finds expression in a historically unreflexive, ontological claim on "Photography as such", which is a conceptual figure that Tagg denies any

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[23] Max Kozloff, in the *Village Voice*, New York: 1981, reprinted in his collection, *The Privileged Eye: Essays on Photography*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987, p. 248. The passage from Kozloff's review is discussed in the preface to Nancy Shawcross' *Roland Barthes on Photography*, p. xi.

critical valence. On this view, Barthes' phenomenology serves only to reassert the sensible form of bourgeois individuality as the dominant trope of historical intelligibility. Barthes' generalisation of the category of evidence and his concomitant abosolutisation of photographic realism are the main targets of Tagg's criticism, thus: "Barthes, against his apparent interpreters, leaves us with a poignant reassertion of the realist position. The camera is an instrument of evidence". That Barthes approaches articulation of this assertion at a phenomenological and existential level dissolves critique into an unwarranted demand that such generalised photographic realism must provide, "the consolation of a truth in the past which cannot be questioned" and this, obviously, would be a politically dubious notion.[24]

Thus, *Camera Lucida* either distorts the categories and objects of inquiry or serves to highlight the ideological complicity of phenomenological ontology with a bourgeois worldview. These are both serious objections. On the one hand, the meaning of aesthetic reflection is misrecognised: Kozloff remains open to the idea of a phenomenological aesthetics of photography, if only it were articulated on the basis of 'proper' social analysis. On the other hand, for Tagg, it is the questionable use of ontology in the context that leads Barthes to misrecognise the historical character of photography as a range of socially instituted and politically conflicted practices.

Nevertheless, not only do the core concepts developed in *Camera Lucida* continue to be very widely used, but Barthes more general notion of photographic temporality has become an implicit standard for criticism that touches on the subject. Indeed, his account of photographic temporality survives through the use of certain key concepts and continues in the form of what one commentator has trenchantly diagnosed as a

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[24] Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, p. 1.

problematic "rhetoric of immobilisation".[25] A central aspect of the impact of *Camera Lucida* on subsequent photographic discourse is the manner in which its radicalisation of the significance of the still photograph's 'freezing' action is determining for the form of photographic experience and the way this is taken to emphasise a reference to death, which can be seen as authorising a rather romanticising tendency in discourse on the resonant 'pastness' of all photographic images. David Green recently described the prevailing effect of these notions on photographic discourse: "The dominant perception of the 'pastness' of the photograph has proven [...] intractable, particularly in the shadow of the cloying melancholia of a post-Barthesian era of photographic theory".[26]

As a specific example of such cloying melancholia, one can also note that amongst the massive literature dealing with *Camera Lucida* there are many other (rather ad hoc) writings that adopt Barthes' quasi-autobiographical style in order to present their own testimony to phenomenological specificity, whilst their writers' aim tends towards the staking of further claims on the generality of photography. In the process they take *Camera Lucida* to define a genre of textual production and effectively characterise photographic theory as a loose aggregate of formalised emotive claims. The writings that comprise this genre are often very disappointing when considered in relation to the sophistication of Barthes' own prose. However, they do at least serve to indicate that it

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[25] I refer here to Paul Frosh's article, "*Filling the Sight with Force*: 'Smoke', Photography and the Rhetoric of Immobilisation", in *Textual Practice*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1998, pp. 323-40. Frosh discusses a well known and highly evocative scene from Wayne Wang's 1995 film, *Smoke*, in which a series of almost identical photographs taken by a shopkeeper (at the same time of day and of the same view outside his shop), are presented to another character in the form of a distinctly unconventional photo-album. Frosh articulates an interesting account of "specular kinaesthesis" that he takes to be "a central anxiety for photographic theory" (p. 327). On the basis of a critique of Barthes' distinction between *punctum* and *studium*—which he takes to reiterate, rather than escape from, assertion of 'classical', hierarchical relations between viewer and image—Frosh offers an interesting account of labile photographic temporalities resistant to ideological overdeterminations and the possibility of critique opened by consideration of different ways of using photographs. For an obliquely related, more sociologically oriented discussion of one such form of use, see Frosh's, *The Image Factory: Consumer Culture, Photography and the Visual Content Industry*, Oxford & New York: Berg, 2003.

[26] David Green, "Marking Time: Photography, Film and Temporalities of the Image", in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, David Green & Joanna Lowry eds., Brighton: Photoforum & Photoworks, 2006, p.17.

is this, which might promise critical redemption from the forms pathos with which Barthes commits himself to flirt.[27]

I would argue that, rather than simply rejecting *Camera Lucida* in order to start from scratch the task of articulating an alternative phenomenology—or deciding by intellectual *fiat* that it adequately demonstrates the redundancy of such an approach—it is important to grasp the specific character of the phenomenological model it presents. This is not necessarily only because it has been misrecognised, dismissed or uncritically accepted by many of its readers, nor only because of the way in which it has been taken to exhaust the possibilities of phenomenological research into photography. Primarily, this task is of interest because—as an object of immanent critique and of ongoing critical controversy—analysis of *Camera Lucida* reveals quite clearly that any phenomenological theory of photography, which would aim to be critically useful, necessitates historical articulation as a core concern. Amongst other implications, this means it would have to deal with the centrality of *Camera Lucida* in the intellectual sphere it would come to occupy.

Orthodoxy / Method / Fiction

What is the specific character of Barthes' phenomenology of photography? If it is so problematic then what would the value of a phenomenological reading of *Camera Lucida* be, especially if it were to remain sceptical about Barthes' treatment of phenomenology and the ways in which this has been (and continues to be) received in

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[27] See Maggie Humm's serial discovery of various '*punctii*' in Virginia Woolf's photo-albums in her "Memory and Photography: The Photo Albums of Virginia Woolf", *Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century*, eds. David Cunningham, Andrew Fisher and Sas Mays, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2005, pp. 42-51. See also, Jolanta Wawrzycka, "Photographeme: Mythologizing in *Camera Lucida*", in *Writing the Image After Roland Barthes*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997, pp. 90-8.

critical commentary? In this context one should be sensitive to the intrinsic sophistry of Barthes' text, but also deeply suspicious of it. Detailed examination is demanded, but there is good reason for asserting that one should not allow Barthes' implicit or explicit directions to dictate what form this might take.

Broadly speaking, there seem to be two already existing options facing the task of reconstructing a phenomenology of photography in relation to this text. One could pragmatically assert the fact that all photographic images are phenomenal objects, or, one might seek to examine the fact that photographs have often been found to be strange objects for formal phenomenology and to do so in the interests of exploring the aporias of this relation.

James Elkins asserts the former position in a critical review of Michael Fried's recent reading of *Camera Lucida*, "Barthes' *Punctum*". Noting that: "For both *Camera Lucida* and 'Barthes' *Punctum*', much depends on what is made of phenomenology", Elkins takes both Barthes and Fried to task for ruling out of court the sense in which all photographs are explicable in terms of the phenomenological principle of reflection on appearances in relation to "one's own measure".[28]

In his essay on *Camera Lucida* Fried takes up Barthes' critique of photographic intentionality and the *studium / punctum* relation in order to give an account of recent photographic art practices (Wall, Ruff, Struth and Streuli are his main examples). He takes these to provide an alternative notion of art practice to the forms of literalism he famously rejected in his "Art and Objecthood" and seems now to think are the pervasive ontological conditions for contemporary art as such. He does this by attempting to establish a correlation between the *studium* and *punctum* and his own notions of

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[28] See Fried, "Barthes' *Punctum*", and James Elkins's critical response to it, "What Do We Want Photographs to Be?: A Response to Michael Fried", which appeared in the following issue of *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 34, no. 4, September 2005, pp. 938-56. The quotations here are taken from Elkins's essay, pp. 942-3.

theatricality and *absorption*, though his reading is subtle enough to avoid making a direct analogy. However, he does take this linkage to justify an almost complete mapping of Barthes rejection of intentionality onto the critique of authorial overdetermination that structures his critical notion of literalist art practices and he presents the notion of absorption as overcoming the dilemma of aesthetic judgement and artistic quality that minimalist (or in his terms, literalist) works assert.[29]

The value of Elkin's dispute with Barthes and Fried rests on his emphasising spatial figures of scale in opposition to temporalised figures of loss, memory and desire. Discussing Barthes' rather offhand dismissal of Harold Edgerton's "prowess" in making his famous multiple images of drops of milk at exposures of infinitesimal duration, Elkin's observes:

> The only other comment Barthes has about prowess is in a parenthesis [...] "(little need to admit that this kind of photography neither touches nor even interests me: I am too much of a phenomenologist to like anything but appearances to my own measure)" (*CL*, p. 33). In that one remark Barthes compresses a massive rejection—so much of photography has to do with appearances incommensurate with human measure—with a significant distortion of the concept of phenomenology. This is not 'vague' or even 'casual' phenomenology, if only because it could be defended by appealing to Merleau-Ponty's own rejection of scientific epistemology and his interest in embodied knowledge of the world. I assume Barthes would not want to follow that line of argument because it is also the case that a photograph of milk droplets can, in a reading wholly dependent on Merleau-Ponty, elicit a strongly embodied reaction. How, in a phenomenological account, could a drop of milk fail to be seen *as if* it were human scaled? Indeed, what can be apprehended—in Kant's sense of that term, in which it is opposed to what can be comprehended—without being taken as an image made to our own measure?[30]

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[29] See, Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Berkeley & London: University of California Press, 1980; and *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

[30] Elkins, "What Do We Want Photography To Be?", p. 943-4. These comments on the question of photographic scale and the intuitable measure thematised in Kant's distinction between apprehension and comprehension suggest that Elkins's discussion of the *punctum* is connected to the Kantian notion of sublime experience. Indeed, much of what Elkins goes on to imply *he* wants photography to be seems explicable in terms of this linkage. In this vein, and in relation to the question of the photograph as mediating scalar relations, one can note the importance of the notion of "aesthetic standard" for Kant's account of the "mathematically sublime".

> In order for the imagination to take in a quantum intuitively, so that we can then use it as a measure or unity in estimating magnitude by numbers, the imagination must perform two acts: *apprehension* (*apprehensio*) and *comprehension* [Zusammenfassung] (*comprehensio aesthetica*). Apprehension involves no problem, for it may progress to infinity. But comprehension becomes more and more difficult the farther apprehension progresses, and it soon reaches its maximum, namely, the aesthetically largest basic measure for an estimation of magnitude. For when apprehension has reached the point where the partial presentations of sensible intuition that were first apprehended are already beginning to be extinguished in the imagination, as it begins to apprehend further ones, the imagination then loses as much on the one side as it gains on the other; and so there is a maximum in comprehension that it cannot exceed.

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett, 1987, p. 108. There is much of interest implied by this linkage. However, his suggestion should be qualified, not least because of the ambiguous meanings of 'phenomenology' in Kant's Third Critique (as registered, for example, in the shifting senses given the concept *Wahrnehmung* in relation to the Critical

This line of thought is attractive in its bold assertion of the fact that photographs, like any other objects, stand as a matter of phenomenological concern. Elkins' criticises the way Fried follows Barthes in defining photography too quickly with reference to "vernacular" practices (and their appropriation as art): "the lack of argument on a point so crucial to the book's axial theme of embodied experience can only function [...] as a sign that a region of photography is being closed off. Photography is domestic and domesticated in *Camera Lucida*".[31] Elkins's criticism of the phenomenology of detail *punctii* is distinctly Merleau-Pontian in this respect:

> Such details can be hard to look at because they will not adhere to my thoughts, which remain bent on the photograph's subject, the one the photograph was meant to pluck out of the matrix in which it is, in fact, embedded. Those nearly unseeable pieces and forms, shapes and parts are the *on-and-on* of the world, its apparently unending supply of usually dull and sometimes uninterpretable *stuff*, and for me they are proof of a difference between whatever photography is and the agendas of vernacular photography in particular. [...] These ordinarily unnoticed forms can prick me, as the *punctum* is supposed to do. But more often they thrive in my peripheral vision like an infestation.[32]

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architecture of *Anschauung, Verstand* and *Vernunft*). These aspects of the Kantian philosophy are taken up as critical objects by Merleau-Ponty insofar as they are based on the logical separation of faculties in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For a conceptually rich discussion of these relations see the passage in the "Preface" to the *Phenomenology of Perception* in which Merleau-Ponty discusses Kant's First and Third Critiques as they impacted on Husserl's later thought. It is of great interest that Merleau-Ponty emphasises the Kantian account of consciousness by way of demonstrating the central significance of the phenomenological *reduction* over and above the concept of *intentionality* and as a counter to the fact that this latter term is conventionally seen as being the major advance achieved by Husserl's philosophy (pp. xviii-xix). Note especially that in his discussion of these issues, Merleau-Ponty's comments on the role of nature in Kant's aesthetics are distinctly Hegelian (and not really Husserlian) in the way that they shift the emphasis from aesthetic judgements of the beautiful and sublime in nature into the register of the philosophy of art. What remains distinctive (and stands as an explicit extension from Husserl's notion of intentionality) here is that this network of philosophical references facilitate introduction of Husserl's notion of "operative intentionality" [*fungierende Intentionalität*] ("that which produces the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and our life, being apparent in our desires, our evaluations and in the landscape we see" p. xviii) and that it does so by asserting *art* as the characteristic mode of the becoming of sense, not as a discreet cultural practice thought of as having its own experiential conditions, nor as the sensible corollary of a logically separate faculty, but as the *style* according to which the world *makes sense* in and through all perceptual experience, thus:

> Kant himself shows in the *Critique of Judgement* that there exists a unity of the imagination and the understanding and a unity of subjects *before the object*, and that, in experiencing the beautiful, for example, I am aware of a harmony between sensation and concept, between myself and others, which is itself without any concept. [...] But if the subject has a nature, then the hidden art of the imagination must condition the categorial activity. It is no longer merely the aesthetic judgement, but knowledge too which rests upon this art, and art which forms the basis of the unity of consciousness and of consciousnesses. [...] Our relationship with the world, as it is untiringly enunciated within us, is not a thing which can be any further clarified by analysis; philosophy can only place it once more before our eyes and present it for our ratification (pp. xvii-xviii).

[31] Ibid., p. 944.

[32] Ibid., p. 944-5.

The thriving of stuff in peripheral vision suggests a way of thinking in Merleau-Pontian terms the excessively full surfaces of photographs. In opposition to this stress on the vernacular Elkins sketches a phenomenological account using Barthes' categories but including a broadened range of technical imaging practices exemplified by different forms of microscopy; the point being that these only really bear relation to the tropes of vernacular photography insofar as they are oriented to end in objects of very broadly similar scale (i.e., as an image form microscopy is almost totally taken up with the task of bringing things to a perceptual measure and this entails the widening of questions of scale to include all that human perception can apprehend 'unaided' through such technical aids to vision). His argument rests on the fact that many of these imaging techniques do not, strictly speaking, have an externally existent referent revealed by the actions of light and chemistry: "We are very far from light here, and yet, strangely, we seem to be looking at what appears to be solid objects".[33] This statement presents

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[33] Ibid., p. 949. Elkins lists various forms of microscopy including: transmission electron, scanning electron, scanning probe and scanning tunnelling and more recent developments such as atomic force, chemical force and nearfield scanning optical microscopy. Some of these forms produce images of things of infinitesimal scale and others are designed to depict the interior of things not normally visible (such as the interior processes of living bodily organs). Elkins' general point is that many of these techniques are oriented to bring things that are constitutively invisible to the eye into view on a scale congruent with human perception and that the processes involved entail the construction of whatever object-event is depicted. A lot depends here on whether one thinks that such an emphasis upon perception demands a reorientation of the theories of representation taken to explain such forms (as Elkins seems to) and whether one takes this critical demand to place in question the broader logical forms that underpin and are sedimented in such imaging practices (as he seems not to). This is a problem that pertains to the meaning of any emphasis on perception in discussion of photography. In this context, one might recall Husserl's argument about the radicality of an emphasis on perception in relation to the categories of nature and world projected by the "objective sciences" and as critically articulated through his concept of "life-world" (in *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1970). Thus:

> The contrast between the subjectivity of the life-world and the "objective", the "true" world, lies in the fact that the latter is a theoretical-logical *substruction*, the *substruction* of something that is in principle not perceivable, in principle not experienceable *in its own proper being*, whereas the subjective, in the life-world, is distinguished in all respects precisely by its being actually experienceable (p. 127, my emphases).

At risk of grossly simplifying these issues, one might say that the meaning of the distinction introduced here depends upon the difference between the form of *construction* that Elkin's emphasizes and Husserl's critical notion of *substruction* (to build beneath or lay a foundation, but in Husserl's hands this foundation is laid for the purposes of thinking its having been built from the position of the life-world). Husserl's argument reveals the "primal self-evidence in which the life-world is ever pre-given" (ibid., p. 128). His view is that the "empirical" or "objective" sciences (as nicely exemplified by the images Elkin's discusses) miss the crucial importance of the level of perceptual experience if they do not

Elkin's most interesting positive claim even though it remains buried in his critique of Fried's liking for certain kinds of large-scale photography depicting everyday life. The things constituted in the forms of microscopy he discusses do not have the kind of presence as the objects, people and situations discussed by Barthes and Fried. They are constituted at a perceptible level as constructs that bear strict existential relation to some-thing, but simultaneously render the definition of the 'things' to which the image is connected (in Barthes' conventional existential sense as people, objects, places) rather tenuous. Furthermore, as forms of photographic image they produce a *generic punctum* effect as they are relatively free of recognisable details that might be taken to correspond to everyday objects and persons. Elkins concentrates on the fact that this insight dissolves the figure of the photographic referent in the Barthesian account of photography, which, for all its abstractness, depends upon a certain interpretive insistence on the shape and size of what a thing might be. A further implication would be that, even at the bare level of reference asserted by Barthes and Fried, what it is that might be described by the claim to necessary reference is constituted only by the level at which it is considered theoretically.

It is notable that Elkins's pragmatically determined approach entails a denial of the significance that Barthes grants the 'strangeness' of photography when considered phenomenologically. An alternative avenue of phenomenological inquiry takes its lead from this very relation. One might, indeed, accept Barthes as having basically 'defined'

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allow consideration of this to inform their deep structures. So, one might argue, the *punctum* effect of the images that Elkins holds up as expanding the notion of photography can and do stand as a compelling criticism of the limited notion of imaging technologies offered by Barthes (and Fried after him); Elkins expands the notion of the technical image in a way that is more concrete and nuanced than they. However, Barthes and Fried's stress on affective forms of social life as they register in an emphasis on the category of the vernacular seems to promise more critical purchase on the phenomenological register of perceptual experience as opening onto a shared life-world. To quote Husserl again: "The objective is precisely never experienceable as itself [...] Naturally, 'rendering ideas intuitive' in the manner of mathematical or natural-scientific 'models' is hardly intuition of the objective itself but rather a matter of life-world intuitions which are suited to make easier the conception of the objective ideals in question" (p. 129).

photography's phenomenological character (as do, influentially, Hubert Damisch and Jacques Derrida) and seek to explore the peculiarities of this achievement in relation to the many peculiarities of phenomenological philosophy.[34]

Derrida's, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes" is exemplary of this tendency. In it he self-consciously exaggerates the relational logic of *studium* and *punctum* in order to thematise the enigmatic character of otherness as an ethical problem. Thus, the temporal form of photographic experience is extended into the metaphysics of differance: "It addresses itself to me, this solitude which tears the fabric of the same, the networks of ruse and economy". This move has the value of heading off what has become an all too direct and rather clumsy association of the photograph with literal death, Derrida continues: "Neither life nor death it is the haunting of the one by the other. The versus of the conceptual opposition is as insubstantial as a camera's click [...] Ghosts: the concept of the other in the same, the punctum in the studium, the dead other alive in me".[35] A rhetorically fortuitous chain of eulogies (formed by Barthes' report on the search for his dead mother and Derrida's report on reading it after Barthes death), stands as a more or less concrete intertextual instance of the logic of such haunting. Through these Derrida approaches Barthes' notion of photographic reference as presenting an aporia that demands examination of photographic space and time on a metaphysically problematic and ethical level. This has the effect of shifting the focus of inquiry away from what little concrete consideration Barthes gives to the social uses of photography.

> By the time the *punctum* rends space, the reference and death are hand in hand in the photograph [...] in the photograph, the referent is noticeably absent, suspendable, vanished into the unique past time of its event, but the reference to this referent, let us say the intentional movement of reference [...] also implies irreducibly the having-been of a unique and invariable referent.[36]

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[34] See, especially, Damisch's, "The Unnegotiable", pp. 14-25.
[35] Jacques Derrida, "The Deaths of Roland Barthes", *Philosophy and Non-Philosophy Since Merleau-Ponty*, p. 264 and p. 267, respectively.
[36] Ibid., p. 281.

The problem is that this refinement makes even more emphatic the already nakedly absolute notion of reference that *Camera Lucida* asserts is explanatory of photography as a socio-historical image form.

I would argue in reading *Camera* Lucida, one need not commit oneself to either of the alternatives represented here by Derrida and Elkins. However promising, in certain respects, both positions may be they remain problematic in their wider implications and—on a level somewhere between the mundane fact of phenomenality and the quasi-transcendental aporetics of intersubjectivity—they both misrecognise something important of the manifest character of *Camera Lucida* as a phenomenological project that would need to be considered first.

The clue to the character of Barthes' phenomenology is to be found in the rather brutally fictionalising use to which he puts phenomenological *method* and the way that he claims it is overdetermined by phenomenology's historical status as an *orthodox* intellectual discipline. This means phenomenology is determined at a level that is neither the straightforward assertion of the phenomenal character of all possible photographies, nor does it make emphatic the temporal logic of supplementarity as the defining aspect of the intersubjective relations that photographic images mediate. The former threatens to reduce phenomenology to description the latter promises to take it far away from the concrete instances to be understood. Rather, analysis of how (and to what ends) orthodox phenomenological method is articulated and appropriated by Barthes should begin by considering the manner in which he reveals his own heuristic approach to reflection in relation to it. This approach becomes significant when one considers that the destination of this heuristic phenomenology is a claim on a notion of "absolute realism" for which the "wonder" and "horror" of photography is that it stands in unmediated relation to the things it depicts. Late in the essay Barthes recalls a

childhood experience in which he saw a photograph of a slave market and his adult interpretation of this experience of history as unmediated by any historian: "the fact was established without method".[37] This claim takes on a distinctly odd sense when one considers that Barthes own appropriation of the procedures and aims of phenomenological reflection (and the characterisation of photography he provides on their basis) are themselves deeply methodologically determined.

> In this investigation of Photography, I borrowed something from phenomenology's project, and something from its language. But it was a vague, casual, even cynical phenomenology [...] First of all, I did not escape, or try to escape, from a paradox: on the one hand the desire to give a name to Photography's essence and then to sketch an *eidetic* science of the Photograph; and on the other the intractable feeling that Photography is essentially [...] only contingency, singularity, risk [...] is it not the very weakness of Photography, this difficulty in existing which we call banality? Next, my phenomenology agreed to compromise with a power, *affect*; affect was what I didn't want to reduce; being irreducible, it was thereby what I wanted, what I ought to reduce the Photograph *to*; but could I retain an affective intentionality, a view of the object which was immediately steeped in desire, repulsion, nostalgia, euphoria? Classical phenomenology [...] had never, so far as I could remember, spoken of desire or mourning. Of course I could make out in Photography, in a very orthodox manner, a whole network of essences: material essences (necessitating the physical, chemical, optical study of Photography), and regional essences (deriving, for instance, from aesthetics, from History, from sociology); but at the moment of reaching the essence of Photography in general, I branched off; instead of following the path of a formal ontology (of a Logic), I stopped, keeping with me, like a treasure, my desire or my grief; the anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the "pathos" of which, from the first glance, it consists.[38]

In this typically allusive, yet absolutely central passage, phenomenology is characterised historically—as a scholastic orthodoxy—and conceptually—as a classicising methodology.[39] Though they remain implicit, take an arguably

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[37] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 80.

[38] Ibid., pp. 20-1. One might make a connection between the remembered status of the phenomenological tradition here and Barthes privileging of the remembered photograph over that which is present to view. Perhaps the status granted phenomenological method in this light is interpretable according to similar forms of desire and elision (at the level of the methodological function attributed to it in *Camera Lucida*) as the slippery question of the placement and actuality of the controversial detail of the pearl necklace in Van der Zee's photograph (see footnote 15).

[39] This presupposition of phenomenological method as a classical writerly form links *Camera Lucida*, albeit obliquely, to Barthes' more general critique of literary classicism and the specific form of the classical novel, which structure his notions of ideology and criticism (for instance, as these themes are developed in S/Z, London: Jonathan Cape, 1975, and addressed in *Criticism and Truth*, London: Athlone Press, 1987). As Jay Bernstein notes, Barthes' notion of ideology arises "*essentially* on the ground of the repression of textual productivity in the classical text" leading him to characterise the notion of textual productiveness, formally, in terms of that which exceeds or seeks to dissolve classicism. The "writerly" text that emerges and is privileged over the "readerly" through the critique of classical form serves to delimit Barthes' notion of ideology and its criticism. Analysis of the ideological character of *both* writerly and readerly texts (in terms of the socialised critical categories of production, distribution and consumption, for instance) is thus ruled out of court. Bernstein sums up this position acutely: "Without these categories the 'sociality' of texts is lost in the vague ether of intertextuality. In fine, because structuralists lack the appropriate categories for social analysis they tend to mislocate the locus of social

compromised form and are not applied consistently, *Camera Lucida's* theoretical implications are deeply structured by this methodological appropriation. Arguing this is not to ignore *Camera Lucida's* intertextual and interdisciplinary form. Rather, it is to remark that a certain view of phenomenology is foregrounded as a term in a structuring analogy, which Barthes takes to elucidate the problems addressed through the registers of intertextuality that saturate *Camera Lucida.*

The passage quoted above asserts that the object of phenomenology—what is to be revealed through the transcendental science of immediate experience—and the failures of its orthodox form—its supposed historical avoidance of fleeting affect and the universalising logic taken to have encouraged this apparent oversight—suggest a means to conceptualise the paradox Barthes places at the core of photography; the contingent form of its universal essence. In fact, the opposite is true. The entire account of the relation between generality and specificity thus projected is indebted to this literary treatment of phenomenological procedure and its historical problems. Barthes reads phenomenology (an explicit 'mathesis universalis'), symptomatically, as a form of writing that has failed in the face of affect and this shapes his "mathesis singularis" of the photograph. In this, Barthes takes advantage of the indubitable tendency phenomenological discourse has shown towards scholasticism (The ways in which it has often been exhausted by a concern for technical problems of method and questions of one's authentic relation to one or other 'master' to the exclusion of concrete analyses of things). His generalisation from this critical diagnosis is casual indeed. Nonetheless, it is determining for his attempt to realise what he sees as photography's generic

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relations, and consequently tend to over-valorise the simply anti-bourgeois", Jay Bernstein, *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 286-7.

contingency and the possibility of conceptualising this as an effectively universal form of affective specificity.

Barthes' treatment of phenomenology as orthodox methodology gives form to the two central presuppositions that are asserted without argument throughout the essay and which are determining for all the observations on photographic experience he presents. It facilitates radicalisation of the intertwined notions that photographs are essentially indexical and that mass culture is inherently banal. These two suppositions coalesce in the 'generalised-singularity' attributed to photographic experience itself, and are expressed as an existential "weakness" characterising "this difficulty in existing that we call banality". His treatment of phenomenology is central to the whole enterprise of articulating the meaning of these claims and the notion of a "weakness" at the heart of photographic culture is that which he takes to form the bridge between its private and public, and specific and generic aspects.

This strategy is rather sophisticated and critically promising, though the formality with which Barthes' elaborates it is disappointing and in many senses quite brutal. One can summarise it in the following manner. In *Camera Lucida* a fictionalised phenomenological methodology is set up as the analogon of reified social experience and this is determining to the extent that the "breaking down" of phenomenology in the face of affect, parallels and facilitates articulation of the "breaking out" of authentic significance from banalised social reality.

Orthodox phenomenological method is positioned as a critical foil to development of Barthes' own heuristic phenomenology of the photograph. He grants it the status of being, so to speak, a fortuitously available conceptual form of socially generalised alienation. The practices of phenomenological reflection are set up as being analogous to the notional degradation of lived experience in modernity. Central to this move is the

idea that, whilst phenomenology supposes itself to have something to say about immediate experience, it has failed to talk about the most striking moments of emotional life and that, anyway, the ponderous approach to such a task it would be bound to make means it would be fated to misrecognise or distort affective states such as love, desire and grief. As such, importantly, phenomenology is taken to already fictionalise immediate experience by turning it into an impoverished category. Though constitutively oriented towards immediate experience the methodological rigor and ponderous structure of formal phenomenology are, equally constitutively, unable to 'see' the fleeting and pathetic yet most pressing of existential states. On this view, what immediacy phenomenology can register misses what is definitive for the actual experience that is supposed to give the concept of immediacy meaning in phenomenological discourse. Nevertheless, Barthes' appropriative refiguration of phenomenology as a fictionalising orthodox methodology does not simply end in its negation. Significantly, it provides the categorial framework for Barthes own attempt to articulate a transcendental and eidetic phenomenology of the photograph.

Before discussing this last point in more detail, it should be stressed that any appeal to what might be thought of as the more suggestive framework of psychoanalysis as a critical vehicle for addressing the significance of fleeting and enigmatic emotive states—whilst it remains significant here—is, literally, foresworn by Barthes in the interests of establishing this analogy between the fictionalised reading of phenomenological generality, his diagnosis of social experience as banal and the manner in which he argues one can see affect emerging from this sphere in a way that allows one to conceptualise it. The questions of affect raised in *Camera Lucida*, though intensely 'personalised', are primarily based in an account of photography that is social in form (whatever the shortcomings of how this is characterised are). The character of

the social form of photography is revealed through the analogy between phenomenology's fictionalising disappointment of one of its central categories and the assertion of specific affect as resistant to mass cultural alienation. The problem at the core of this strategy is that the relation between phenomenology and social form are conceived in terms of two related forms of effectively ideal transcendence: the entirely eidetic character of photographic time on the one hand and, on the other hand, the un-locatable event character of irruptive affect conceived in terms of absolute specificity.

Of all the "novelistic" or "literary" motifs in *Camera Lucida*, its phenomenological fiction is the least examined and yet most central. It can be said to characterise all of the others including the two that have been most attractive to other commentators: the allusions to psychoanalysis, such as those places where Barthes links photography's contingency to the Lacanian notions of 'the real' and 'encounter', and, perhaps more importantly, the resonances that Barthes' focus on irruptive affect and memory have with Proust's celebrated conceptualisation of "voluntary" and "involuntary" modes of remembrance. In this light, if one were to take the advice given by Victor Burgin and to attempt a reading of *Camera Lucida* as a "fiction", which remains a good suggestion, it would appear most fruitful to do so in terms of the ways it deals with formal phenomenology.[40]

Burgin's comments to the effect that *Camera Lucida* is distinctly "novelistic" are presented in order to make sense of its deployment of phenomenology "in tandem" with psychoanalysis. He sees this as a basic contradiction, because of the way in which phenomenology "rejects the notion of the unconscious" (and here Burgin generalises

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[40] Victor Burgin, "Re-reading *Camera Lucida*", where he writes of any possible synthesis of psychoanalysis and phenomenology that it could not be achieved at the level of theory "which would be impossible", rather one should look for this "at the level of literature" and further remarks that, "The review of *Camera Lucida* as a work of fiction is yet to be written", p. 88.

from the model of Sartrean phenomenology).[41] Indeed, the important position of psychoanalysis in contemporary cultural criticism certainly makes any such apparently stringent denial of the unconscious appear outrageous. But one is left wondering whether the relation is really quite so stark as it seems to be for Burgin. His response to this theoretical possibility is actually quite measured. He remarks merely that it would be a shame to lose out on the rich analytic gains generated using the theory of the unconscious in cultural criticism and this is a fundamentally compelling point. It is, however, worth dwelling on this denial of phenomenology (as being most appropriate to discussion of photography) in these terms as it threatens to elide the importance of Barthes' own manner of distancing his inquiry from what might now appear, normatively, to be the concern of psychoanalytically oriented cultural criticism. This would threaten to miss the rich implications of Barthes explicit relocation of such concerns onto the territory of phenomenology. Perhaps one might go so far as to assert that the forms of displacement involved in the psychoanalytical interpretation of *Camera Lucida* (memory as a kind of displacement and Barthes' treatment of loss are obvious instances, but one can also think of the ways in which the paradoxical presence of that which is deathly are characterised as a *noesis* without *noeme* and that this is the temporal form Barthes grants the experience of loss) are misleading if read primarily in

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[41] Ibid., p. 83. An alternative view on this relation can be found in the comments made by Merleau-Ponty in the "Preface" published in 1960 for A Hansard's, *L'Oeuvre de Freud et son importance pour le mode moderne*, Paris: Payot, 1960, and republished in *Merleau-Ponty and Psychology*, pp. 67-72. Merleau-Ponty writes:

> Since our philosophy has given us no better way to express that *intemporal*, that *indestructible* element in us which, says Freud, is the unconscious itself, perhaps we should continue calling it the unconscious—so long as we do not forget that the word is the index of an enigma—because the term retains, like the algae or the stone that one drags up, something of the sea from which it was taken.
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> The accord of phenomenology and psychoanalysis should not be understood to consist in phenomenology's saying clearly what psychoanalysis had said obscurely. On the contrary, it is by what phenomenology implies or unveils as its limits—by its *latent content* or *unconscious*—that it is in consonance with psychoanalysis. Thus the cross validation between the two doctrines is not exactly *on* the subject man; their agreement is, rather, precisely in describing man as a timber yard, in order to discover, beyond the truth of immanence, that of the *Ego* and its acts, that of consciousness and its objects, of relations which a consciousness cannot sustain: man's relations to his origins and his relations to his models. Freud points his finger at the *Id* and the *Superego*. Husserl, in his last writings, speaks of historical life as of a *Tiefenleben*. Phenomenology and psychoanalysis are not parallel; much better, they are both aiming toward the same *latency*" (p. 71).

terms of psychoanalytical categories. Maybe the very opposite position needs to be explored.

These points need to be made more emphatically. It is not a matter here of suggesting another optional reading, or really of discovering the one 'proper' interpretation of this text. Though this phenomenological interpretation *is* just another possible reading amongst others, in a certain sense, it also speaks to a central theme in *Camera Lucida* that asserts its phenomenological aspect as demanding priority. This is signalled by the basic guiding assertion that there is a pure essence of photography. Even though Barthes' methodological approach to the phenomenological theorisation of photography may be fictionalised and, thus, subject to the indeterminacies of intertextual relations and even though its melancholic implications may be interpretable, (may even demand interpretation) in psychoanalytical terms; *as a matter of principle*, the fundamental claim made in *Camera Lucida*—that the *eidos* of photography is its spatially displaced and irruptive temporality ("the lacerating emphasis of the *noeme* (*'that-has-been'*)", granting it the status of "a bizarre *medium*, a new form of hallucination: false on the level of perception, true on the level of time")—nevertheless has to be considered (logically and existentially) as being primordially of phenomenological concern.[42] The retrospective temporality and formal alienating properties of photographs presented in *Camera Lucida* remain, strictly speaking, a problem pertaining to their perception, however attenuated. It is this that makes photographic experience pathetic on his account and it is what allows him to generate a temporal paradox in the conceptual place of the transcendence that relates to and serves to characterise perceptual and imaginative acts. It is notable that transcendence is what Barthes evacuates from this relation but also makes emphatic in what remains over as the 'one-sided' neomatic

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[42] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 96 & 115, respectively.

structure of intentionality by which he characterises the essence of the experience of photographs that he seeks to articulate. But this description of a one-sided *noematic* structure that gives form to the eidetic account of photographic temporality anticipates and demands to be worked out in terms of the relation between Barthes and Sartre. Indeed, these considerations suggest that the relation between Barthes' photographic concepts and Sartre's psychology of the imagination demand much more careful analysis.

Adventure and Stickiness: The Laminate and *the Fleshy World*

In some senses the fact that *Camera Lucida* is dedicated to Sartre and, specifically, to his *The Imaginary* of 1940, is very important as many of Barthes' most celebrated concepts are derived from Sartre's text.[43] In other senses the linkage is misleading. Nonetheless, the earlier study would seem to be suggested as the place to begin an attempt to read *Camera Lucida* as a phenomenology. As noted above, Barthes' previous writings and some of the claims made in *Camera Lucida* are based in a model of Saussurian linguistic theory and his later notion of intertextuality that stand in directly critical relation to Sartre's existentialism. Merely to stress the oddness of this fact or to proceed as if it had no significance (as do most commentators) would be to miss the point of the relation. What needs to be understood is the centrality of certain Sartrean themes and concepts for Barthes' discussion and the manner in which, this centrality notwithstanding, they are turned to distinctly un-Sartrean ends.

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[43] Two slightly earlier works by Sartre deal with related themes at the level of psychological theory. They are: *The Imagination: A Psychological Critique* (of 1936), trans. Forrest Williams, Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1962; and, *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* (of 1939), trans. Philip Mairet, London: Methuen, 1962. For a useful discussion of the relationships between these texts see Hide Ishiguro, "Imagination", in *Sartre: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Mary Warnock, New York: Garden City, 1971.

In general terms one might say that the emphatic notion of intentionality in Sartre's writings on psychology provides the negative form for Barthes' idea of photographic reference. For Barthes, the value of intentionality is strictly limited. On a social level it describes an almost totally achieved form of instrumentality that structures cultural experience and foregrounds it as an object of critique. On a psychological level it describes the real circumscription of desiring consciousness that derives from this situation. He takes intentionality to describe the overdetermined operations of mass culture (taking, so to speak, the model of consciousness as consciousness-of-something to be true only to the extent that it has been colonised by the instrumental intentions that structure mass culture). The historical process of an instrumentalisation of intentionality that Barthes projects enables a shift in categorical emphasis and orientation. In this phenomenology the conceptual and methodological place of intentionality is taken by what one might call an interminable phenomenological reduction. In the place of Sartre's existential articulation of intentionality as the fraught ethical confrontation between a subject thrown into the world and the meanings of their environment, Barthes proposes an emotively spontaneous process according to which the irruption of affect might shatter the instrumental form of mass culture. Analysis of *Camera Lucida's* relation to Sartre reveals a key structural element of Barthes appropriative phenomenology to be an attempt to articulate a 'socialised' notion of the phenomenological and eidetic reductions. But what does this (as yet speculative) claim mean?

In the *Imaginary*, Sartre attempts to develop a phenomenological psychology of consciousness defined according to the possibility that its intentional structure is characterisable by examination of imagination as "imaging consciousness" (as opposed to perceptual consciousness and cognition which appear as radically different

"attitudes", defined by the ways in which they bring things to light in different situations). Sartre characterises consciousness according to "the fact that it is consciousness capable of imagining" and asks the question: "what must consciousness in general be if it is true that the construction of an image is always a possible"?[44] Imagination stands as a problem for phenomenological psychology as it is not, in principle, dependant upon the forms of presence and/or apodicticity one might, in this context, take to be definitive of perception and cognition. The value of Sartre's psychology is that it takes this problem to be determining insofar as it allows characterisation of what he calls the *irrealising* function of imagination as the form of experience characteristic of consciousness. This fundamental characteristic, or eidos, of imaging consciousness as a transcendental possibility derives, on Sartre's view, from the "*one* world" that is co-posited as a correlate to consciousness and is formative of the situation of imagining. One can modulate one's conscious experience to focus on that which is distant, unreal, in the past or in the future but to take up such possibilities is always only ever to modulate one's situated experience in relation to the 'one world' in which such imaginings stand out as possibilities to be enacted. In this framework, the irrealising function of imagination is worthy of attention because it entails the denial of the perceptual and cognitive form of the simple presence of things in the world, whilst remaining in principle an affirmation of one's being-in-the-world. The privilege granted the imagination for consciousness on this model places nihilation (the active realisation of nothingness as a condition of all value and its existential orientation) at the core of conscious experience.[45] Late in his discussion he summarises the distinction between

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[44] Sartre, *The Imaginary*, p. .

[45] The discussion of annihilation given in *The Imaginary* and the concept of nihiliation from it is derived and which Sartre discusses at length in *Being and Nothingness*, written some few years later are central to his philosophy. Nihilation is the theoretical form according to which Sartre describes the ontological condition of negation implied by acts, thoughts and practices that have pragmatic effects in

imaginative, perceptual and cognitive modes of consciousnesses in the following manner:

> I have shown the difficulties raised by every attempt to constitute perception by an amalgam of sensations and images. We now understand why these theories are inadmissible: because the image and the perception, far from being two elementary psychic factors of similar quality and that simply enter into different combinations, represent the two great irreducible attitudes of consciousness. It follows that they exclude one another. [...] When one aims at Pierre as imaged through a painting, one ceases by that very fact to *perceive* the painting. But the structure of images called 'mental' is the same as that of images whose analogon is external: the formation of an imaging consciousness is accompanied, in this case as in the preceding, by an annihilation of perceptual consciousness, and reciprocally. As long as I *look* at this table, I cannot form an image of Pierre; but if all at once the irreal Pierre surges up before me, the table that is under my eyes vanishes, leaves the scene. So these two objects, the real table and the irreal Pierre can only alternate as correlates of radically distinct consciousness; how could the image, under these conditions contribute to forming the perception?[46]

For Sartre, basically, imaging consciousness gives the experience of an object but at the price of only ever including what one puts into it. Thus, it is deeply characterised by its intentional form and, importantly, it operates an *irrealising* function in distinction to perception. Nonetheless, images entail situated and directional relation to that which is imagined, even if their objects are impossible or distant. The relation between imagination and perception is, however, guaranteed at the level of corporeal existence.

> Whether I perceive or imagine that chair, the object of my perception and that of my image are identical: it is that straw-bottomed chair on which I sit. It is simply that consciousness is *related* to this same chair in two different ways. In both cases, it aims at the chair in its concrete individuality, in its corporeality. Only, in one of the cases, the chair is 'encountered' by consciousness; in the other it is not.[47]

Thus, the image and, indeed, imagination itself entails "a kind of essential poverty" that is, nonetheless, tied to the existence of the object depicted or imagined. It is primarily this set of distinctions and concepts that Barthes seizes upon. But he takes up Sartre's notion of intentional consciousness only insofar as he thinks it describes the reified structures and operations of existing culture so that the notion of culture comes

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the world. It is a concept that characterises and suffuses what can be described as banal actions and more significant conditions and situations, thus if one is thirsty and takes a drink from the refrigerator one negates the given condition of being thirsty and reflection on this reveals that to nihilate (literally to make nothing out of a situation) is a form of active transcendence that also describes the forms of inauguration of difference or novelty that might be taken to characterise political of moral actions of a less mundane character.

[46] Sartre, *The Imaginary*, p. 120.

[47] Ibid., p. 7.

to supplant the universal psychological fact of consciousness as being intentionally directed. For Sartre perception "constantly overflows consciousness" and in opposition to this, "the object of an image is never anything more than the consciousness one has of it".[48] Perception is always too full and constitutively mutable to have the form of an image: "I always *perceive more and otherwise* than I see. It is this incontestable fact—which seems to me to constitute the very structure of perception".[49] It is in elaborating this insight in terms of the Husserlian notion of perspective modifications that Sartre establishes the difference between perception and imagining.

> We could then say, with Husserl, that perception is the act by which consciousness puts itself in the presence of a spatio-temporal object. Now, into the very constitution of that object there enters a mass of empty intentions that do not posit new objects but which determine the present object in relation to aspects not presently perceived. For example, it is understood that this ashtray before me has an 'underneath', that it rests *by means of this underneath* on the table, that this underneath is white porcelain, etc. These diverse pieces of knowledge (*connaissances*) come either from a mnemonic knowledge, or from antepredicative inferences. But what must be noted as well is that the knowledge, whatever its origin, remains unformulated, antepredicative: it is not that it is unconscious but that it sticks to the object, it merges into the act of perception. What is aimed at is never explicitly the invisible aspect of the thing, it is that visible aspect of the thing such that an invisible aspect corresponds to it, it is the upper face of an ashtray such that its very structure as upper face implies the existence of an 'underneath'. Evidently it is these intentions that give the perception its fullness and its richness.[50]

Camera Lucida's central theme of the affective resonance of particular photographic images is, indeed, deeply indebted to Sartre on these points. One of the most direct connections between the two texts is to be seen in Barthes slightly eccentric adoption of Sartre's notion of emanation, which describes the relation between, for instance, the figure of another remembered as having been imagined in a dream and the forms of identification through emotive resonances that one might have felt, or might remember feeling, in relation to their fate in the dream. Various figures of desire are discussed by

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[48] Ibid., p. 9-10.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid. This is later qualified by a comment to the effect that the radical difference between them allows for the transliteration of perceptions to imaging consciousness, but at a price: "There is therefore in perception the beginning of an infinity of images; but these can be constituted only at the price of the annihilation of perceptual consciousness" (Ibid., p. 122).

Sartre in relation to such forms of identification Barthes transliterates the concept into photographic terms.

Of all the differences between Sartre and Barthes here one is determining. It is introduced by Barthes' insistence that photography is an absolutely distinct and epoch making image form: "Photography's referent is not the same as the referent of other systems of representation. [...] It's not optionally real; it's necessarily real [...] Every photograph is somehow co-natural with its referent".[51] For Sartre, the elaboration of differences between modes of representation in terms of how they intentionally 'give' the experience of another or of a thing is secondary to articulation of the different modes of world disclosure granted by the fundamental attitudes of consciousness (imagining, perceiving and conceiving). For Barthes, the historical innovation of the chemical processes that allowed for photography interrupted and transformed this situation by expanding and inverting the directions and forms of connectivity articulated through possible imaginative irrealisations, thus:

> The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant [...] A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.[52]

Here, his metaphorisation of the body's invisible interior and visible exterior (and some of those parts or organs that move between the two) constitute a disjunctive relation between different kinds of physical contact. On this description skin seems to be a rather sterile coating constituted more by its relative scale than anything else. For Barthes, at crucial points like this, the surfaces of bodies are marked by a form of intersubjectivity entirely oriented to the camera, which serves to attenuate his pessimistic view on the possibilities offered by posing for one's picture. The light

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[51] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 76.
[52] Ibid., pp. 80-1.

sensitivity of photographic emulsion is the medium of this co-location. In the context, when considered as a significant surface, human skin seems to be nothing much more than a coloured bag that is big enough to reflect light in a certain way. Rather than being a metaphor of emanation that secures the carnality of photography, this description turns things around to posit the surface of the human body as particularly appropriate for transliteration into photographic emulsion. This is, however, a point that is in some ways resonant with Merleau-Ponty's theorisation of the visible and the concept of flesh as will be discussed later.

The distinction and the similarities between Barthes and Sartre on such points becomes clearer when one recalls that the radicalisation of the photograph as a novel and historically distinct image form shapes Barthes writings about photography from his 1964 essay, "The Rhetoric of the Image", onwards.[53] Famously, in the earlier text, "The Photographic Message", Barthes had claimed that what is distinctive about photography is the manner in which it gives the impression of a purely denotative (i.e., immediate and uncoded, though distinctly 'bare') meaning, without artifice or intention. On this view, the photograph's strict 'analogical' relation to what it depicts colours its signifying operations with the representation of the brute reality of things and events, insofar as it indicates without artifice the fact that they existed or happened. This position is summarised in the famous and controversial thesis that a photograph is a "message without a code". In "The Rhetoric of the Image", Barthes adds a further (phenomenologically paradoxical) twist to this thesis: the experiential implications of the uncoded message establishes in the photograph an awareness of the fact that what is represented was *there* in a more significant and emphatic sense.

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[53] Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image", in *Image, Music, Text*, Trans. Stephen Heath, London: Fontana Press, 1977, p. 44.

> What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority, the photograph being an illogical conjunction between the *here-now* and the *there-then*. It is thus at the level of this denoted message or message without a code that the *real unreality* of the photograph can be fully understood: its unreality is that of the *here-now*, for the photograph is never experienced as illusion, is in no way a *presence* (claims as to the magical character of the photographic image must be deflated); its reality that of the *having-been-there*, for in every photograph there is the always stupefying evidence of *this is how it was*, giving us, by a precious miracle, a reality from which we are sheltered.[54]

It is this existential qualification of the photograph as a message without a code that is further articulated in *Camera Lucida* as the necessary condition of the form authentic photographic experience through which the value of affective specificity as such might emerge.

Whilst the "Rhetoric of the Image" essay deals with the novel and decidedly strange temporality of the photograph, conceived as an "illogical conjunction between the here-now and the there-then", it does so with a different emphasis to that given the same thesis in *Camera Lucida*. The phrase: "there is always the stupefying evidence of this is how it was" from the earlier text would sit just as well in the later. However, the meaning granted such stupefaction is critically inverted in *Camera Lucida*. Significantly, in "The Rhetoric of the Image", the photograph "is never experienced as an illusion" it is "in no way a presence" and the elaboration of its temporal paradox is immediately followed by the warning: "claims as to the magical character of the photographic image must be deflated". Barthes' argument regarding the "denotative" character of the photograph as a "message without a code" is an elaboration of what he will later call the "analogical" character of the image and dismiss in *Camera Lucida* as an inadequate "means of analysis", indicating that the search for the transcendental character of the photograph's relation to its referent has, in fact, to conceive the "emanation of past reality" in photographic experience as "a magic, not an art".[55] These two passages agree on the historical significance of the invention of photography; it

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[54] Ibid.
[55] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 88.

remains in *Camera Lucida*, a "type of consciousness" that is "truly unprecedented". The earlier text does not treat the question of this temporality in so strictly a "transcendentalised" manner: "What we have is a new space-time category: spatial immediacy and temporal anteriority"; the "here-now" is mediated by the "there-then" and the spatial character of the latter is made emphatic as a socialised category of experience.[56] Both positions remain highly debatable: the earlier for its insistence on denotation as an interpretive key for the social operations of images and the latter for its sentimental transcendentalisation of affect.

In a way that has been much discussed, the trajectory of Barthes writings on photography move from an interpretative confidence in the semiotic decoding of cultural phenomenon towards the more ambiguous terrain of the literary interrogation of elusive aspects of desire. In "The Rhetoric of the Image", the paradoxical character of the photographic image's denotative spatio-temporality—the "illogical" compresence of what really was but is no more, with what indubitably is here now—renders the photographic image distinct. *Camera Lucida* is concerned to articulate the further possibility that the paradox of illogical compresence that defines this historical distinctness also offers an absolutely intimate but enigmatic experience of that which has been lost. The question here is not whether Barthes' personal experiences are generalisable to photographic culture as such, but whether photographic culture has had the effect of reducing history to constitutively private affect. Thus, *Camera Lucida* focuses on the specific 'losses' embedded in each singular image, but only insofar as understanding of their sensible form is premised upon the more general sense of a loss of specific and significant experience. The form of Barthes' response to this intimate but alienating relation is intrinsically melancholic; the continuing presence of what is gone

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[56] Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image", p. 51.

is won only the expense of its having passed away. This has important implications for thinking about the kind of historical experience that might have been overwritten and obscured by photographic culture as well as the specific item, person or place that is preserved unchanged in the generalised world of photographic emulsion. Thus, "In Photography, the presence of the thing is never metaphoric [...] the corpse is alive, as *corpse*: it is the living image of a dead thing".[57] It would be a mistake to think that analysis of the form of temporality Barthes takes this claim to suggest might be exhausted by examination of the shifting grammatical tenses that he deploys in order to articulate its paradoxical character. Ultimately, in *Camera Lucida*, inquiry into the temporality of the photographic image is led by a "stupid metaphysics". It is crucial to note that the 'stupidity' orienting this idea of photographic experience derives from assertion of an intractable belief in the phenomenal encounter described as this is forced upon critical discourse that views culture as stupefying.

Photographic realism promises some form of salvation on Barthes view but only insofar as it can be thought absolutely in response to this historical situation. The photograph does not just evoke the dead it gives one the experience of the dead as *specified* in a way that only the living can be, through one's lived relation to their photographic representation. The living dead are embodied in the encounter with an image insofar as the viewer's reflective embodiment promises to animate the experiential encounter. Here, his vague and disassociative mode of acedic comportment commits Barthes' to dwell in a world one might describe as being divided into laminate and fleshy spheres that are connected by the particular possibilities of photographic emulsion (but, quite regrettably, not also by blood and guts). This temporal and material relation stands as the location in which referential relations collide and characterise

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[57] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 79.

affective experience, but only insofar as such affect is situated in the 'one world' suspended by the magic of photographic reference. The living dead find themselves magically transported into the lives of the living in a way that makes them function as correlative terms descriptive of living (i.e., life as being lived *and* as being over and done with). There are two zombies in this magical relation, both of whom are partially defined by their overlapping laminate and fleshy conditions. This is a reciprocal form of animation that brings the lost other back to life, but only as the desire for redemption of the living from their habituation to the deathly form of their constitutive otherness to themselves. This is, indeed as Tagg claims, an account of photography that seeks, "the consolation of a truth in the past which cannot be questioned".[58] But, if one were to be generous to Barthes, one might say that Tagg misrecognises the problematic character of the concept of history that the former projects as determining this relation. The point is that the present, for Barthes, is saturated by death as a figure of the generalised loss of specificity. On this positive interpretation, phenomenologically, history is consumed by the present of affect that the past adheres to and the manner in which this adherence animates things. This entails the radical and literal aestheticisation of history as a critical category. But, in its defence, I would argue that this is meant to account for what Barthes' takes to be the desperate situation of contemporaneous culture. Barthes is committed to the idea that explicit aestheticisation characterises modernity and that all a critic can do is perform a mimesis of historical form in a way that hopes to be critically disruptive.

In light of these problems, one should note that there are other moments at which Sartre's text facilitates the narrative of *Camera Lucida* and that these do not usually feature in critical commentary. Two of these are telling as they are quite cynically

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[58] Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, p. 1.

mobilised by Barthes to hammer home his basic ontological presupposition regarding the essential characteristics of photography's referentiality. Firstly, it is on the back of Sartre's assertion that large swathes of photographic culture leave him emotionally unaffected that Barthes divides the whole of photographic culture into studious intentionality and moments of irruptive excess over this. He does so through a concatenation of terms borrowed from Sartre, as in the following passage where he talks of the adventure of certain images that have the temporal character of advening in experience, and are suggestively said thus to animate one's experience of them.

> [I]t seemed that the best word to designate (temporarily) the attraction certain photographs exerted over me was *advenience* or even *adventure*. This picture *advenes* this one doesn't. [...] The principle of adventure allows me to make Photography exist. Conversely, without adventure, no photograph. I quote Sartre: "Newspaper photographs can very well 'say nothing to me'. In other words, I look at them without assuming a posture of existence. Though the persons whose photograph I see are certainly present in the photograph, they are so without existential posture, like the Knight and Death present in Dürer's engraving, but without my positing them Moreover, cases occur where the photograph leaves me so indifferent that I do not even bother to see it 'as an image'. The photograph is vaguely constituted as an object, and the persons who figure there are certainly constituted as persons but only because of their resemblance to human beings, without any special intentionality. They drift between the shores of perception, between sign and image, without ever approaching either". In this glum desert suddenly a specific photograph reaches me; it animates me, and I animate it. So that is how I must name the attraction which makes it exist: an *animation*. The photograph is in no way animated [...] but it animates me: this is what creates every adventure.[59]

Making the adventure of photography as an epoch-making image form emphatic, Barthes derives from this line of thought his celebrated division of photographic culture into the *studium* and the *punctum*. Famously, the field of the "studious" is photographic culture determined by the banal generality and learning and it is saturated by overt forms of productive intentionality and their corollary, the consumer's more or less polite interest. The punctum, as is also very well known, is a kind of emotive relation to the indeterminacy of specific cultural facts that exceeds overdetermination and that sometimes "emerges" from the field of intentionality. It is a term to describe those moments when one is "struck", or "pricked" by what—in the register of the photographic—is a meaningful encounter with a particular image—and in the register of

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[59] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 19-20. Barthes is quoting here from *The Imaginary*, pp. 24-5.

the metaphysics of desiring excess over culture—indicates affective specificity as such.[60]

Also notable, but far less often remarked, is the evocative metaphor of "stickiness" that underlies the *studium* / *punctum* relation and informs Barthes' emphasis on adherence, emanation and reference. Barthes borrows this metaphor from Sartre in order to radicalise the descriptive operations of the photographic image as pure referentiality. In a sense, this form of adherence is more general (and more generally interesting) than the *punctum*. In this light, one can note that the "tautological" character of photographs upon which the different notions of *punctum* are based is rather dubious: "In short, the referent adheres. And this singular adherence makes it difficult to focus on Photography".[61] This informs the following set of claims.

> A photograph cannot be transformed (spoken) philosophically, it is wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope. [...] The Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of "Look", "See", "Here it is"; it points a finger at certain *vis-à-vis*, and cannot escape this pure deictic language. [...] A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least it is not *immediately* or *generally* distinguished from its referent [...] By nature, the Photograph [.] has something of tautological about it [...] It is as if the Photograph always carries its referent with itself, both affected by the same amorous or funereal immobility, at the very heart of the moving world: they are glued together [...]. The Photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: Good and Evil, desire and its object: dualities we can conceive but not perceive.[62]

The metaphoric resonance of the "stickiness" of such ontologically determining relations facilitates articulation of the body as the site of affect and of perception as mediated at the level of the social by the institutions of photography. To paraphrase what Barthes makes of this relation one could say: All photographs, as a matter of

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[60] Broadly speaking, the *studium* is Barthes figure for generality and intention (as in sameness, overdetermination, the banal and what is a concern for the masses; it is a mundane mode of comportment "without special acuity"). The *punctum* is his way of figuring specificity in opposition to this (which, at the very least, veers extremely close to being defined as that which is special to *one* and the manner in which this might literally mark one out from the crowd; a politically dubious sign of acute enculturedness). Despite the fact that the *punctum* is significantly inflected by these overtones of distinction, innate sophistication and superior sentiment, it has proven to be the most useful (and the most used) of the photographic concepts coined by Barthes.

[61] Ibid., p. 6.

[62] Ibid., pp. 5-6.

principle, glue some reference regarding the "fleshy" world of lived experience to the "laminate" world of the mediating image as a form of social practice but only some of them are, properly speaking, significant in the way they do this. One might, indeed, ask whether Barthes' adoption of the metaphor of adherence ever seems quite 'sticky' enough to account for any credible sense of the desiring relations he wants to salvage by means of this theorisation.

The suggestion of two adherent worlds joined by affectual experience of excess over cultural form and the account of the conditions of their recognition as being sited in the body—but nonetheless maintaining their relation to a concrete and singular world—is the most interesting aspect of the whole study. It holds out, implicitly, the possibility of differentiating more general, wide ranging and determinate aspects of what he designates as the basic character of photographic reference in a way that the concept of *punctum* has proven not to.

Throughout, Barthes acknowledges the contingency of his categories as they derive from habitual treatment of photographic images. For instance, one might think here of his comments on the convention of 'looking through' the surface of photographs, ignoring their material characteristics and treating them as showing in an unmediated fashion what they depict. In the passage quoted above he starts off quite reasonably describing this as a contingent form of use, "at least it is not *immediately* or *generally*" that one concentrates on the material form of a photograph. However, he ends by hypostatising this as indicating, "dualities we can conceive but not perceive". In between these lies the far more compelling critical prospect of, "that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both".

What, one would have to wonder, is being described in this clause beyond the layered material form of the laminated print? What (or perhaps better, where) is the

location of this relation? Firstly, one finds the resurgence of the idea that photographs belong to a class of objects (as being classifiable, which is odd as Barthes' inquiry refuses such an approach). If one insists on thinking of the first two members of this class (photographs and windows) as dualities it is clear that one can very easily both conceive and perceive of them at will, contrary to Barthes' assertion. His hypostatisation of duality thought of from this point of view is unwarranted and fundamentally unconvincing. The umbilical cord of light and emulsion is stretched to breaking point as a metaphor here. His gambit, however, is to extrapolate the affectual basis of the more general narrative of mediated desire from the linkage with the last two members of the class. These are the ethical categories according to which Barthes' attempts to establish absolute realism as a register of the universal and transcendental form of intersubjectivity. There is more than an echo here of the structure of Barthes' earlier critique of the realist novel and its valorisation of descriptive accuracy or faithfulness. Famously, these notions were the subject of an earlier criticism which stressed the forms of indeterminacy and a certain lack of purchase on reality highlighted by the interplay of the coded form of such linguistic operations, as in the following passage from *S / Z*.

> To describe is thus to place the empty frame which the realistic author always carries with him [...] before a collection or continuum of objects which cannot be put into words without this obsessive operation [...] in order to speak about it, the writer, through this initial rite, first transforms the "real" into a depicted (framed) object; having done this, he can take down his object, *remove* it from his picture: in short, de-depict it (to depict is to unroll the carpet of codes, to refer not from a language to a referent but from one code to another). Thus, realism [...] consists not in copying a (depicted) copy of the real: this famous *reality*, as though suffering from a fearfulness which keeps it from being touched directly, is *set farther away*, postponed, or at least captured through the pictorial matrix in which it has been steeped before being put into words: code upon code, known as realism.[63]

Barthes later emphasis on the absolute realism of photographic reference takes his own earlier criticism of literary realism to be descriptive of the form of agency he grants to the general operations of photographic culture and out of this relation the frankly

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[63] Roland Barthes, *S / Z*, trans. Richard Miller, New York: Hill and Wang, 1974, p. 55.

metaphysical form of specificity that resists or exceeds it emerges. There are two significant moments structuring this move. Firstly, he takes the difference introduced by his radicalisation of photographic description—a mediate term suffused with confidence in intentionally oriented representation vis-à-vis the reality to be depicted—in the direction of a transcendentally idealised notion of reference, to transfigure and exaggerate this characteristic of the "carpet of codes". Secondly, this meant that the 'real' radicalised and 'revealed' as the enigmatic and unruly irruption of affect is transformed into a totally generic form of specificity. [64]

The metaphor of stickiness and its linkage to the signifiers of temporality in the relationship between adventure and animation are promising in general terms for a critical evaluation of Barthes' account of photography. Their function in introducing the main themes of the *studium* and *punctum* is to project the paradoxical character of photographic temporality. But, for all the centrality of the Sartrean themes discussed above, Barthes address to these problems is distinctly un-Sartrean.[65] This difference

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[64] In this context, it is surely not being pedantic to note that many, if not most, of the images upon which Barthes bases his phenomenological inquiry did not actually have a laminate form. They were reproductions in magazine supplements (an mode of the production of images that differs in material structure from conventional photographic prints). In these terms one can think of the frontispiece reproduction of the evocative Polaroid image by Daniel Boudinet (*Polaroid*, 1979) presented in the French edition of *Camera Lucida* as performing, at a technical level, a distinctly Sartrean annihilation of perception in favour of the radicalisation of the descriptive content of photographic images. Boudinet's image is after all a Polaroid, ironically perhaps given the context, the most emphatically singular of widespread photographic formats with a laminate structure. Here its reproduction according to the conventions of the mass production of books denies the specific characteristics of the Polaroid, (its specific size changed to fit the format of the book, shorn of its holder/print-unit, having its intensity of colour compromised in the process and, as such, stretching the loosely asserted media-specific emphases of Barthes account of reference, not to mention being made up of printed dots of ink). Barthes' boredom with mass cultural form extends to include a separation of attention from perception that includes the denial of phenomenological experience that can and does reflect with attention to detail. For all that he asserts that the specificity of photographic experience is *noesis* without *noeme*, this instance dramatises the fact that the photographic culture he participates in is very obviously saturated with *noema* he simply chooses to ignore. This is an instance that suggests Barthes' notion of reference may well in the end dissolve into the crude assertion of content over form.

[65] Having said this, I would argue that there is no reason for Jean Michel Rabaté (one of the few Barthes' scholars to pay much attention to the Sartrean themes in *Camera Lucida*) to be quite so confident about the meaning of the shift between Barthes earlier Sartrean notion of "the imaginary" and its later Lacanian reformulation (read putative 'overcoming') in the notion of "image repertoire". Undoubtedly,

rests on the radicality of Barthes phenomenological interpretation of what photography's distinct status as an image form means, as in the following: "One might say that the Photograph separates attention from perception, and yields up only the former, even if it is impossible without the latter; that this is an aberrant thing, *noesis* without *noeme*, an action of thought without thought, an aim without a target".[66] For Barthes, there remains the possibility that the entity so thrown finds no correlative term. This is a situation that would be strictly impossible in Sartre's terms as the situated character of existence is always already structured by just such a correlation. This is a crucial point as it makes questions of essence absolutely central to Barthes notion of the photograph. On Barthes view there is no insistent and co-posited 'one world' that situates the experience in question. Rather, I would argue that there are the (involuntary and enigmatic, but nonetheless determining) acts of a transcendentally constituting ego. The emphasis on the methodological 're-siting' or 're-staging' of phenomenology as orthodox method through which Barthes articulates this, suggests that his account of photography can be understood in terms of the transcendental phenomenology of Husserl.

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there is a shift, but I would remain sceptical about whether Rabaté captures its significance in the following.

> Initially, Barthes' position in the face of images seems to be a very suspicious or critical one: he stated his reluctance or hostility to 'analogical' forms of thought and art many times, always preferring the ethical cleanliness of discursive—therefore, discrete, digital, articulated, and codified—formations. Language can demystify because it never adheres to reality; its arbitrary nature introduces a differential space in which one can really think. The almost Sartrean terms I have just used still account for Barthes' convergence with Lacan's early condemnation of the "Imaginary" realm as that of the ego's subjective illusions. For both Sartre and Lacan, the stickiness of the subject's identification produces unwholesome coalescences between signifiers and signifieds; this imaginary projection is the first lure to be debunked. Barthes' career can thus be described as going from one "Imaginary"—the Sartrean consciousness, which underpins existentialist or neo-Marxist phenomenology—to another, the Lacanian "image-repertoire", which has to be squeezed between the logical structure of the symbolic and encounters a real that resists language.

Rabaté, p. 1-2. My point here isn't that Rabaté or the many other writers that have stressed Barthes references to the "image repertoire" are wrong to remark and expand upon it. Rather, it is to note the irony of Barthes' distinctly Sartrean construction of this term at rather significant points and the way these remain resistant to a Lacan reformulation.

[66] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 111.

The first and most important thing to remark in this light is that Barthes' qausi-casual approach to phenomenological reflection is oriented by what—given that the desire of eidetic phenomenology is to uncover the "universal" essence of experienced things—is a rather striking finding: the eidos of the photograph is its contingency. Here, *Camera Lucida* seems to be quite strictly oriented by his appropriative interpretation of phenomenology. The structuring analogy between phenomenological discourse and denuded affectual life is literally mapped onto photography as a description of its mass cultural form and operations: but at the price of rendering photography entirely eidetic. In order to articulate this claim in detail it is necessary to give a brief description of Husserl's eidetic phenomenology.

Eidos is a term adopted by Edmund Husserl in his attempt to articulate the transcendental aim of phenomenological philosophy; to grasp cognitively the essence of the relationship between thought and Being. For Husserl, eidetic intuition is synonymous with the (apriori necessary and typical) forms of all psychic phenomena. Regarding the essences of objects, one could say that, if "every individual fact has its own essence", as Joseph Kockelmans summarises, then:

> Just as conversely to each essence there corresponds a series of possible individuals [...]. An individual object is not simply a mere "this-there" but, being constituted "in a specific way itself", it has its own proper mode of being, its own *eidos*, which can be apprehended in all its purity [...]. The term "*eidos*", or "essence", is here taken to mean that which in the intimate self-being of an individual discloses to us "what it is".[67]

Essences are thus the universal and rule giving norms for all empirical experience of encountered objects, meanings or facts. Yet this is not the limit of the notion of eidos for Husserl. As Levinas has noted, the normative status of ideal essences, that which

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[67] Joseph Kockelmans, *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*, West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p. 134.

grounds the claim that they can be grasped in thought is not, strictly speaking, derived from an attempt to, "identify essences with a character or moment of individual objects that has been isolated by an effort of attention [...] Ideality is not the indetermination of an object; ideality characterises the object's mode of existing".[68] Cognitive articulation of the proper form and transcendental status of essence, so conceived, is the main aim of Husserl's later phenomenology and its central concept of eidetic intuition or *Wesensschau*.[69] In this context, (to quote Levinas' gloss on *Wesensschauung* once more): "The mode of existence of ideal objects in some way refers us back to individual objects and contains an implicit relation to individual objects. But the existence of individual objects does not serve as a premise for eidetic knowledge, which is independent of the effective existence of individual objects".[70]

Husserlian phenomenology famously approaches the task of thinking such essence through the methodological procedure of reduction, epoché (literally, "bracketing out"). This, to say the least, rather contentious form of reflection took different shapes in the development of Husserl's thought. Generally, however, in its descriptive, phenomenological, eidetic and transcendental modes, the reduction is intended as a reflective setting aside of one's concerns regarding the actuality of engagements with

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[68] Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, p. 104.

[69] As Joseph Kocklemans has it, the somewhat obscure relationship between the concepts of phenomenological psychology and eidetic phenomenology in Husserl might be thought as follows:

> If the theoretical eye focuses on the necessarily enduring invariant in the process of variation, then the realm of the a priori will arise, provided one proceeds systematically. In phenomenological psychology, it is thus possible to bring to light the eidetically typical form, or *eidos*, of the psychic phenomena, such as perception, imagination, emotion, and so on. Phenomenological psychology in this manner can be established as an 'eidetic phenomenology'. Just as the phenomenological reduction provided us with the means of access to the phenomena of the real, and also of potential, inner experiences, so the method of 'eidetic reduction', which is founded upon it, provides the means of access to the invariant, essential structures of the whole sphere of the soul. The expression 'eidetic reduction' refers to a process by means of which one can proceed methodically from concrete facts to the eidetic structures of these facts.

Joseph Kocklemans, *Edmund Husserl's* Phenomenology, West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1994, p.132. It is this relation between the idea of a phenomenological psychology and the what essential sphere might be opened onto that characterizes the function of the for of intuition described by the concept of *Wesensschau*, which literally translates from the German as the intuition of essences and refers to that which, in immediate experience might be held onto and defined by the reflective practices of phenomenological philosophy.

[70] Ibid., p. 106-7.

objects and practices and the ways that these structure and inform one's life in the world; the supposition being that such an act of wilful imaginative suspension could facilitate intellectual access to the essential characteristics of experience.

It is worth dwelling on the general procedural aspects of the reduction as they appear to be key to the manner in which Barthes projects phenomenological method as one side of his account of photographic culture. Indeed, it would not be going too far to say that it is Barthes' appropriation of this key aspect of phenomenological practice that comes to structure his notion of mass culture in general. Furthermore, remarking this allows one to clarify the deeply problematic way in which Barthes positions photography as exemplary of cultural experience and as opening onto an authentic mode of singularity.

In his late work, *Experience and Judgement*, Husserl gives an explicit methodological description of the eidetic reduction.[71] This mode of reflection is supposed to strip the contingent factors of experience away in order to reveal its universal characteristics. An important stage in this process is "imaginative variation", which entails thinking of something in such a way as to turn it into an arbitrary example. This exemplary thing is considered, in Husserl's words, as "a point of departure for the production of an infinitely open multiplicity of variants".[72] The idea is that one attempt to think of imaginative variations through which such an exemplary thing could be put, whilst still remaining intuitable as a thing of its kind. It is important that the entire set of imaginative variants thus produced be "immediately intuitable", i.e., that one can imagine them all at once and as a set, yet still without concern for their actual existence. Importantly in this context, if one were to attempt to think an infinitely variable list of actual variants, the resulting image or intuition would rest not on the set,

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[71] Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgement: Investigations in a Genealogy of Logic*, ed. Ludwig Landgrebe, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp. 339-49.

[72] Ibid., p. 340.

or on an imaginatively projected generic characteristic, but on the singular characteristics of the arbitrarily selected and last imagined example. In this instance, one would perform merely "the inventive imagining of a thing or a figure, changing into arbitrarily new figures" and in this case one would only encounter "something always new, and always only one thing: the last-imagined".[73]

This description of the reduction as a method of reflection also describes the structure of photographic culture as Barthes projects it. His way of passively leafing through numerous images one at a time, only stopping to reflect upon those that strike him as significant, is dependant upon the constant flow of images in the cultural sphere he occupies. It is as if the subject presumed to have the ability to wilfully suspend their concern for normative uses and meanings of things and to imaginatively vary the characteristics of one fact, meaning or object is split by this reflective procedure. Half of the agency attributed to this subject, so to speak, is given over to the movements and processes of mass cultural production. The problem with this lies in the fact that Barthes thus incorporates in the reflective structure of his attempt to think a universal essence (even if it is one that is pure contingency as he claims) has the character of a concretely instantiated and interminable infinite series. Repetition and reproducibility (the social forms taken by such conceptual seriality) are thus absolutely central. What is supposed to gather together and constitute the imaginatively intuitable 'set' is the specificity of the affective experiences that only certain of the images encountered provoke. Thus, to press the core analogy here in a critical direction, what Barthes seizes upon is the arbitrarily emergent and last-imagined example but this exemplary status seems dubious inasmuch as it is, basically, imagined by someone else whose interests are instrumental.

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[73] Ibid.

The reflective process of the Husserlian eidetic reduction is supposed to produce the intuition of variations that exhibit a "unity that runs through this multiplicity of successive figures" and Husserl claimed that this serves to reveal the general essence of the thing to imagination:

> In such free variations of an original image, e.g., of a thing, an *Invariant* is necessarily retained as the *necessary general form*, without which an object such as this thing, as an example of its kind, would not be thinkable at all [...] this form stands out in the practice of voluntary variation, and as an absolutely identical content, an invariable *what*, according to which all the variants coincide: *a general essence*.[74]

The aim is to grasp the ideal essence of things cognitively. The process of imaginatively producing the intuition of such a general invariant is not taken to constitute such knowledge, but to suggest how one might do so.

> The essence proves to be that without which an object of a particular kind cannot be thought, i.e., without which the object cannot be intuitively imagined as such. This general essence is the *eidos*, the *idea* in the Platonic sense, but apprehended in its purity and free from all metaphysical interpretations, therefore taken exactly as it is given to us immediately and intuitively in the vision of the idea which arises in this way.[75]

The move to cognitively explicit grasping is guaranteed by the way imaginative variation is supposed to remain "in touch" with and not to "add anything" to the original normative experience of the object reflected. The intuited essence, thus conceived, is supposed not to entail any interpretive act on the part of the reflecting subject. The explicit articulation of this consciously produced, yet apparently passively emergent, (or *sui generis*) sense of invariance is taken to comprise one's mode of access to the eidos of the thing. Importantly in this context: "The universal which first comes to prominence in the empirically given must from the outset be freed from its character of contingency".[76]

With this description of Husserl's methodological outline of eidetic phenomenology in mind one should note that the schematic treatment of phenomenology in *Camera*

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[74] Ibid., p. 341.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid.

Lucida takes the structure and procedures of the reduction (in its different stages and with their different orientations) and literalises these as descriptive of the operations of photographic culture. For all its literary sophistication as a strategy meant to say something about social reality this is rather brutal. Effectively, reality is viewed through the eyes of one for whom almost all qualitative experience is ceded to reification and who can do nothing else than note those instances when, despite prevailing forms of cultural overdetermination, something vague but emotionally striking occurs. Barthes collapse of reductive cultural form into the process of reflective reduction as its intellectual analogon, does not and cannot take account of specific social registers of photographic form. This is a pity as this way of thinking might be rendered critically useful were it able to conceive aspects of photography that Barthes rules out of consideration, such as the inherent reproducibility of negative based photographic images and the fact that such reproductions always and necessarily take specific material forms that affect experience of them. Barthes reduction, in its desiring treatment of only those photographs that he is "sure exist for him" and his treatment of photographic culture "photograph by photograph" appears to be a wilfully aberrant form of the phenomenological reduction that appears specific on the side of his descriptions of emotive response, but wholly generic and empty on the side of its necessary social reference.

By way of conclusion, one can note that despite these problems something of critical value might be gained by noting the similarities and differences between Barthes insistence on a phenomenology of technically mediated desire and Andre Bazin's celebrated account of photographic realism in his *Ontology of the Photographic Image*. Bazin places an equal (if not stronger) emphasis on the intimate relation between photographs and what they depict:

> The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discoloured, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the representation; it *is* the model.[77]

This stark assertion of coincidence is qualified at a later point in his discussion: "The photograph and the object itself share a common being, after the fashion of a fingerprint".[78] Bazin makes this claim in support of a psychological account of the social function of images; that they serve to "snatch" appearances "from the flow of time" in order to embalm them for posterity.

> Hence the charm of family albums. Those gray or sepia shadows, phantomlike and almost undecipherable, are no longer traditional family portraits but rather the disturbing presence of lives halted at a set moment in their duration, freed from their destiny; not, however, by the prestige of art but by the power of an impassive mechanical process: for photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper condition.[79]

Many have noted the similarities between Barthes and Bazin's wonder in the face of the mechanical transferal of light that registers apparently exact appearances in a photograph. What is important here is that both stress this notion of photographic evidentiality in order to link it to powerful psychological affects. But there remains a critical distinction to be made between their modes of doing so.

Bazin's epoch spanning account of the social function of art psychologises the image, reducing the desire that defines the impulse to make images to a meta-theory of resistance to the inevitable effects time (and it's a rather unconvincing one at that). Barthes strives to articulate an account of desire at a similar level of abstraction, however, his account differs in two important respects. Firstly, Barthes conceives of emotional life (at the level of explicit conception and meaningful perception) as

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[77] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image", *What is Cinema?, Volume 1*, trans. Hugh Gray, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, republished in *Classic Essays on Photography*, Alan Trachtenberg (ed.), New Haven, Connecticut: Leete's Island Books, 1980, (from which all references here are taken) p. 241.

[78] Ibid., p. 242.

[79] Ibid.

degraded, under threat and liable to escape reflective discourse and he does so in a manner that is (at least in principle) more reflexive with regard to the historical conditions of the cultural forms through which such experiences might be mediated. Secondly—if the reading offered above is taken to have purchase—in his search for a way to conceptualise the specificity of singular instances of affectual experience he puts explicit psychological considerations in brackets, literally suspending them as features of a "natural attitude" to be reflected in the manner of the phenomenological and eidetic reductions. In this sense, *Camera Lucida* is empathically a phenomenology of photographic experience, albeit a distinctly odd one. Yet this procedure, when viewed in terms of the suspension and critical dissolution of the natural attitude, appears problematic, as it can attain no position from which to critically reflect upon this demand. Barthes' treatment of phenomenology as an 'object' or as an historical symptom literalises, or perhaps better, formalizes the reduction as a fiction that describes the operations of photographic culture as such and as they impact on emotional experience. To put the point quite brutally, his analogy establishes an intimate relation between the 'reductive' character of mass culture vis-à-vis lived experience and the aims and problems of the eidetic 'reduction' as a reflective process. Photography—the form he takes as most suggestive for his "science of the singular" is that which reduces desire, but in doing so also allows it to be salvaged. But in the terms of Barthes' own phenomenology, this form meant to guarantee this salvage is facile.

When considered in light of criticisms (such as the following offered by Peter Osborne) the phenomenological emphases outlined above promise to be critically useful in assessing some of the other, more recent, interesting and yet still problematic uses of *Camera Lucida*. Osborne writes:

> In turning to the photograph as that object whose being offers the greatest possibility for such a 'scientific' experience of singularity, Barthes turned against the dual reduction of the image to the sign and the imaginary (image = sign + imaginary) which had characterized his previous work [...]. But he made singularity into a fetish.

> He refused to draw theoretical implications from his analysis and, crucially, he ignored the reproducibility of the photograph image: the fact that negative-based photographic prints are multiples and can make multiples of any image so produced.[80]

In this Osborne articulates an alternative to Barthes' notion of what is structuring for photographic form, thus:

> What I want to suggest is that 'the generality which neither reduces nor crushes' is the *generality of reproduction*. Reproducibility is the key to the relationship between iconicity and indexicality, singularity and generality of meaning. For 'reproducibility' (replicability) is at once a concept of semiotics and a socio-historically specific set of techniques. The specificity of the photograph lies in the fact that it derives an 'evidential force' from the temporal singularity of its referent in such a way that it is, nonetheless, infinitely reproducible—even if it is never actually reproduced.[81]

Barthes makes emphatic the linkage between this radically novel historical image form and the phenomenological demand it makes for a stupid metaphysics in an interview he gave in 1980, in which he describes *Camera Lucida* as being:

> [...] like a phenomenology of photography. I consider the phenomenon of photography in its absolute novelty in world history. The world has existed for hundreds of thousands of years, there have been images for thousands of years, since the cave paintings [...] There are millions of images in the world. And then, all at once, around 1822, a new type of image appears, a new iconic phenomenon, entirely, anthropologically new. It's this newness that I try to examine, and I place myself in the situation of a naive man, outside culture, someone untutored who would be constantly astonished at photography.[82]

The adoption of this untutored gaze threatens to dissolve into a specifically bourgeois fantasy (with overtones of regrettable class politics) and stands as a travesty of the more interesting moments of his text's problematisation of mediate forms of intersubjectivity. This is indeed a cynical form that posits an emphatically bourgeois sensibility as the paradoxical mode of anti-bourgeois cultural critique. This objection is not devastating, however, but it does point towards a far more significant problem, namely, that the form

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[80] Peter Osborne, "Sign and Image", p. 39. The historical and ontological implications of photography's form of dissemination are considered by Peter Osborne in terms of the Kantian concept of "distributive logic" in his, "Photography in an Expanding Field: Distributive Unity and Dominant Form", *Where is the Photograph?*, ed. David Green: Brighton and Maidstone: Photoforum and Photoworks, 2003, pp. 63-70.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, trans. Linda Coverdale, New York: Hill & Wang, 1987, p. 357.

of intersubjectivity that Barthes is at pains to construct is inadequate for understanding the social and historical relations that he posits as characterising photographic images.

This chapter has characterised what I take to be a neglected but important aspect of Barthes' phenomenology of photography. It has revealed a range of emphatic claims with regard to the phenomenological reflection on technologically mediated desire. If this eidetic phenomenology of the photograph is eidetic in the Husserlian sense, then perhaps an appeal to Merleau-Ponty's critique of the eidetic reduction and of Sartre's stark account of internationality might allow one to rethink Barthes' account of photography in order to place it on a more firm and socio-historically convincing footing. In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty describes the reduction in the following manner:

> It is because we are through and through compounded of relationships with the world that for us the only way to become aware of the fact is to suspend the resultant activity, to refuse it our complicity, [...] The best formulation of the reduction is probably that given by Eugen Fink, Husserl's assistant, when he spoke of "wonder" in the face of the world. Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unit of consciousness as the world's basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical. [...] All the misunderstandings with his interpreters, with the existentialist "dissidents" and finally with himself, have arisen from the fact that in order to see the world and to grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it and, also, from the fact that from this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world. The most important lesson, which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction.[83]

This suggests the possibility of a reconfigured phenomenological account of photography that might share some of the structure of Barthes' and which also would enable its critical transformation. This view of phenomenological reflection entails an existential thematisation of the phenomenological reductions, which can be used to critically articulate some of the problems discussed above. This is the task of the next chapter. In common with Barthes, Merleau-Ponty's comments on the reduction here also provide a critique of the valorisation of the Husserlian notion of intentionality (at least in part). This point towards the major difference that will be explored in chapter

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[83] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. xiii-xiv.

two, the centrality of the notion of art for Merleau-Ponty's philosophical project as this drives from his critique of Husserl. It is by clarifying the character, role and historical impact of art as a phenomenological problem for Merleau-Ponty that the attempt to outline a Merleau-Pontian theory of photography must begin.

CHAPTER TWO

TOWARDS A MERLEAU-PONTIAN THEORY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Andrew Fisher,
Double time,
2004.

To see is to enter a universe of beings, which display themselves, *and they would not do this if they could not be hidden behind each other or behind me. In other words: to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But in so far as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. Thus every object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can "see"; but back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it "shows" to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others around it as spectators of its hidden aspects and as a guarantee of the permanence of those aspects*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

To what extent is the image itself already flesh?

Rolf Sachsse, *Spirit, Body, Photography—and Morality*

Merleau-Ponty, Art and Cultural Criticism

When Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has featured in debates on the visual arts it has been, for obvious reasons, at times when perception—as a category taken to inform or explain artworks—has come to the fore or has been put in question. It is notable that key distinctions conventionally taken to establish differences between appeals to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a theoretical framework for cultural practice are not always easily rendered in clear terms as they often overlap temporally and conceptually in support of critically opposed practices. This is significant as the ways in which his conception of perception is positioned in debates on art tends to place limitations on the range of meanings he gives the concept.

For instance, his aesthetics have been taken to offer an account of modernist painting and sculpture that centres on the notions of style and expression and stresses the manner in which exemplary works require acts of visual synthesis and completion. These are, indeed, the major concerns of his explicit writings on art, but they are often interpreted rather too simply as being cognate with traditional art historical senses of style,

expression and vision and as supportive of an elitist view of culture. In explicit opposition to this possibility, his broader holistic account of perception—stressing the bodily, kinaesthetic and situated character of all perception—has been taken to support understanding of art practices that are explicitly critical of what they take to be an overweening emphases on the visual in art discourse. By dint of the generality of this stress on the whole body, such appropriations have more often than not been taken to be more aesthetically radical and comparatively democratic in form. This contrast describes, for instance, an important aspect of the relationship between certain forms of modernist sculpture and minimalist art practices. These latter tend to be discussed in terms of their specific and obvious anti-modernist impulse. However, key aspects of the distinctness of minimalist works from other art practices dissolves when one considers that they also served to reiterate modernist principles of auto-critical formal constitution, (albeit with a shift in emphasis from existing historical connections between certain media and the forms of perception considered appropriate to them, towards the relationship between a more generic notion of art and plastic material as such). This framework was also intimately tied to the pragmatically determined industrial conditions of production of "extra artistic" objects. Thus Donald Judd wrote that he was looking for a way of making art that would avoid the tensions attendant upon the compositional ordering of pictorial space. He looked instead towards the serial modes of organization implicit in the production line and industrialized culture: "One thing after another", becoming the laconic principle of arrangement of modular elements.

Viewed in terms of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception debates about the relative value of an expansive literalisation of relations between art space and social space versus the limitation of art to a separate sphere of aesthetic experience offered by

modernist art tend to place limitations on the basically ambiguous character of perceptual experience his philosophy is famous for articulating. Indeed, this contrast suggests that the question, 'What does Merleau-Ponty's famous characterisation of perception as ambiguous actually mean?', might once again be of importance to contemporary understanding of cultural practices. It is my contention that the historical trajectory of problems of perception in recent and contemporary art and cultural criticism has served once again to make this a pressing issue.

It is in debates around three-dimensional art that such distinctions appear most polarised and in which protagonists on all sides make appeal to Merleau-Ponty. Famously, controversy over the proper form of aesthetic experience and arguments over the relative value of representation as opposed to abstraction have centred on the relation between modernist sculpture (exemplified by David Smith and Anthony Caro) and minimalist and land art (Robert Morris, Donald Judd and Richard Serra) and as these are, respectively, promoted by Michael Fried and Rosalind Krauss. Both Krauss's notion of "sculpture in the expanded field" and Fried's account of the "fecundity" of the abstract syntactical relations informing synthetic three-dimensional constructs were both responses to perceived problems in the dominant model of Greenbergian critical aesthetics and the emergence of critically oriented new art.[1] Stephen Melville discusses these key figures and the ways they both were framed by recognition of: "the appropriateness and necessity of some reference to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in negotiating the claims of the new art". These contesting appeals to phenomenology were motivated, in particular, by the, "difficulty in or exhaustion of Greenberg's

[1] See Fried's retrospective description of his critical position, "An Introduction to My Art Criticism" in *Art and Objecthood*, pp. 1-74; and Kraus's, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field", *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: MIT Press, 1985, pp. 276-90. (p. 148). Perhaps the most detailed extended study of these relations is Alex Potts', *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist*, New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000.

valorisation of pure 'opticality' as the presumed criterion underlying modernist art".[2] Melville summarises the relation in question in the following manner:

> Both found Merleau-Ponty's work of interest because of its holistic understanding of perception as the activity of a fully embodied subject that could not be reduced to an abstract eye. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology—and indeed the general phenomenological emphasis on grasping things as they are—appeared to offer a way of continuing an essentially formalist attention to the specificity of the work while considerably opening up the possible terms and scope of that attention.[3]

In this cultural sphere attributions of formalism are generally pejorative, serving to associate whichever theory or critical position is in question with the apparently entirely formal characteristics of Greenberg's account of aesthetic judgements with respect to the character and value of modernist artworks. Here I take Melville's use of the term formalism to indicate something far less often remarked, namely, the sense in which such appeals to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy often remain limited in their conception of the social and historical character of perceptual acts.

Perception for Merleau-Ponty is an ambiguous concept precisely to the extent that it describes a primordial (i.e., obvious but nonetheless logically and existentially 'first' and ultimately ontologically determining) level of the organisation of experience characterised by an admixture of sensory (biological and physiological), cultural (social-historical), linguistic and cognitive (epistemological) and desiring (psychological) senses or orientations. It is the value of his multi-faceted interrogation

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[2] Stephen Melville, "Phenomenology and the Limits of Hermeneutics", in *The Subject of Art History: Historical Objects in Contemporary Perspective*, eds M. Cheetham, M. A. Holly & K. Moxey, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 148. Melville outlines the broad social and cultural impact of phenomenological ideas in terms of a series of shifts in cultural attitudes that gravitate towards valuing the specific situated experience of particular individuals and as contributing to a widespread change in attitudes to judgement and interpretation. Charting this in terms of the hermeneutic destabilization of "notions of authorial intention", the reorientation of "questions of meaning around the act of reception" and the impact explicit phenomenological ideas had on a range of disciplines such as sociology, literary studies and the history and philosophy of science, Melville sketches out the problem of phenomenology as a contrast between pre-existing critical methodologies and a general mode of address to the ambiguous experience of cultural objects, thus:

> Phenomenology [...] is less a method than a commitment to the careful description of things as they show themselves in our experience of them; such description unfolds toward interpretation on grounds significantly different from those of traditional art history, where interpretation seeks its justification through notions of objectivity of the kind Merleau-Ponty is explicitly concerned to reject (p. 146.).

[3] Ibid.

of perception that it touches on all of these spheres in its attempt to characterise those entities for whom perception is their mode of being-in-the-world. This is important in the current context insofar as competing claims on relative values of synthesis and dissolution of existing aesthetic forms, and the unity or extension of the art work (as well as the different sensory modalities suggested by these categories) are overdetermined by the desire to lay claim to the 'proper' sense of formal aesthetic concepts such as abstraction and construction and their historical significance in relation to prior claims on art and aesthetic experience. On both sides, this amounts to a formalism because it entails the explicit formalisation of what the ambiguous character of perception might mean.

Merleau-Ponty's notion of art is explicit in its reference to certain forms of modernism (Cézanne and Rodin, for instance), but not really in terms of the conventional separation between the different kinds of formalism projected as aesthetic conditions by mid-twentieth century modernist sculpture and minimalist and land art. The formal aspects of these latter tend to be understood in terms of an extrapolated notion of the abstract subject of embodied perception, an entity anticipated and situated by a three dimensional intervention into a more or less pre-defined social space. Nevertheless, it still appears clear that what threatens to be overlooked in this are the socially textured, historically and politically articulated aspects of what Merleau-Ponty takes discourse on perception to mean.[4]

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[4] Though in many ways tangential to the present discussion such issues are important and worth noting in more detail. The history of the reception of existentialist ideas in post World War II cultural discourse is complex and the major voices that have, so far, described it tend towards partiality. Rosalind Krauss is exemplary in this respect and an indication of what is at issue in the reception of key concepts such as situation, gesture and embodied perception can be sketched by considering the way in which she has attempted to mediate the differences between French and American culture over the post World War II period. In a catalogue essay that sought to introduce the work of Richard Serra to French audiences in 1982, Krauss describes Merleau-Pontian aspects of the existentialist focus on representation that marked early reception of Giacometti's sculpture in France and contrasts this with the "abstract subject" of aesthetic experience projected by the works of Serra. (Rosalind Krauss, "Richard Serra, a Translation",

At different times Merleau-Ponty's works have been read as providing a range of separate and appropriable concepts that inform or explain artistic practices; notably, the

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originally published in *Richard Serra*, Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1982, and republished in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 260-74). She opposes this to the existentialist thematisation of, "a certain way of looking at distance", (Ibid., p. 263, quoting this description given by Reinhold Hohl, in his, *Alberto Giacometti*, Laussane, 1971, p. 107, and also Sartre's, "La reserche de l'absolu", *Les Temps Moderne* in 1949 and, *Situations III*, Paris: Gallimard, 1949, pp. 289-305). Krauss seeks to distinguish existentialist and phenomenological readings and to distinguish between Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics and his broader theory of embodiment. She interprets Serra's work as situating subjects by interpolating them (at the level of a shared and anonymous, perceptual intentionality) through abstract sculptural form and its 'real-world' placement, whilst disassociating the Merleau-Pontian theorisation of such from the existentialist notion of gestural expression as this had featured in defences of modernist practices in the 1950s. Thus: "In the United States, however, the existentialist reading of the aesthetic field (whether this entailed the interpretation of Giacometti or of the local phenomenon of action painting) was curiously shorn of its relation to a phenomenology of perception. For Merleau-Ponty was not translated into English in the 1950s, and Sartre's man-in-a-situation was commonly understood to be moral, not perceptual man", (Ibid., p. 263). Her critical distinction depends upon this gap in translation. In between the 1950s and 60s, she continues: "a very different understanding of what could be meant by Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'pre-objective experience'" arose, (Ibid., p. 264). The critical overlap between the problematic character of Kraus's anti-Greenbergianism and the importance of her notion of 'sculpture in the expanded field' can be indicated by contrasting her Merleau-Pontian account of French and American art with David Sylvester's writings on Giacometti. Sylvester writes:

> The real point is to render visible that fact that the effigy of a human figure which the sculptor is making is within his reach though the figure he is representing is beyond his reach. Our experience of the work reconstitutes the relationship between sculptor, sculpture and model. As an object, the sculpture is within our reach as it was within the sculptor's reach—indeed, it is the reverse side of his gestures, the traces of his gestures, and the roughness of its surface emphasizes this—but the sculpture as a human figure is separate from the sculpture as an object, it is not within reach.

David Sylvester, *Looking at Giacometti*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1994, pp. 25-7. This explicitly Merleau-Pontian account of Giacometti's parsing of conventional sculptural form foregrounds an unfortunate aspect of art writing influenced by Merleau-Ponty. The lack of theorisation of social differences structuring the subject positions from which such description is made means that his aesthetics are weak in the face of prejudice and Sylvester exemplifies one way in which they have proven open to forms of political co-option:

> And all those single female figures who might be models in a studio might equally be girls waiting in a brothel or a street or a room. Wherever they are their role is to be seen and to return the beholder's gaze. They stand there motionless, always as if trembling on the brink of movement, always doing no more than see and be seen.

Ibid., p. 29. Articulating an apparently general account of Giacometti's 'universal' mediation of the conditions of perceptual experience—"What is relevant is the way that a sculpture seems to act on space" (Ibid., p. 36)—Sylvester makes his own gender politics more than obvious.

> The single figures of standing women almost invariably seem to remain beyond one's reach whatever one's physical distance from them. When I face one of them from the far side of a room and start moving towards her, for the first few paces she seems to come nearer, then she begins to recede from me as fast as I approach. She keeps, so to speak, her distance. It is as if she were detached from the physical space of the room and existed within a separate space of her own. As I get near, I do not, as one normally would, see only the part of the figure around the point I am focusing on; I can still see the figure entire. And when I get right up to her, to the point at which I expect to be seeing details in close-up, relishing the curve of a cheek, of a breast, I see hardly anything of the a figure at all.

Ibid., p. 40. In this passage, the richness of phenomenological description is turned to the task of promoting objectionable social norms. For all that Kraus's account of Serra is self-serving in tenor, her emphasis on the relation between abstraction and anonymous intentionality is definitely preferable to Sylvester's claim on generality. Nonetheless, her appeal to Merleau-Ponty is simplistic in its ascription of anonymity to the side of abstract art and too quick to dismiss the social reflexivity of earlier, existential accounts of representation, probably because of her desire to escape Greenbergian aesthetics and to dismiss American appropriations of existentialism at the same time in the same short text.

varying uses to which 'gestural behaviour' and 'situated perception' and more recently, 'flesh' and 'brute' or 'wild' being have been put.

Perhaps most distinctively in the context of a discussion of photographic art and theory, Merleau-Ponty's ideas have often also been the focus of stringent critical censure with regard to their supposed assertion of vision as a mode of access to a realm of pre-linguistic meaning. Victor Burgin's dismissal of theories of perception in his "Something About Photography Theory" address of 1984, is exemplary in this context. In this review, Burgin describes transformations in thinking about photography in the 1960s and '70s. Taking as his example the theory of perception shaping Ernst Gombrich's writings and framing the semiotic, psychoanalytical and political radicalisation of photography theory in opposition to the forms of commentary Gombrich influenced, Burgin criticises the predominance of perception in art discourse.

> In the first place, such theories of perception have nothing to say about the social world from which and into which photographs are produced. Secondly, the spectator—photographer, or member of the audience for photographs—the spectator assumed by such theories is itself an entity outside of society and history. Essentially, the spectating subject of such theories is a disembodied eye, albeit an eye connected to complex neurological / psychological circuits. The subject of such theories is without gender, race, class, age, or any affectional preferences. Not to be able to talk about such things in a theory of photography would be a disadvantage. Clearly, we should not criticize a theory for failing to do what it never set out to do in the first place; equally clearly, theories of perception do not get us very far in our understanding of photography in its various uses.[5]

This criticism remains cogent as an attempt to radically refigure cultural discourse by questioning ideologically saturated relations of significance. However, Burgin's criticism extends to all theories of perception in a way that entails misrecognition of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as a *philosophy* that might interrogate just such questions. Given the importance of the tendency in photographic theory that Burgin represents

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[5] Victor Burgin, "Something About Photography Theory", *Screen*, volume 25, no. 1, January / February 1984, p. 62. Burgin's article was part of a focussed critical challenge to existing modes of art discourse. The edition of *Screen* it is published in contains no less than six other articles that make the same point in different contexts, as for instance in Simon Watney's "Photography—Education—Theory": "It is one sign of the absolute poverty of mainstream photographic criticism in Britain that such preposterously reductive ontological assertions are incorporated wholesale into the curriculum of both vocational and non-vocational courses, as well as dominating the magazine literature for amateur and "popular" photography", Ibid., p. 69.

here one might say that, clearly, one should not criticise his theory, in its turn, for failing to do what it never set out to achieve in the first place; namely, to think the embodied bases of perception as a problem for socio-historical knowledge and to do so ontologically. One could say that the theoretical advance exemplified by Burgin here has been responsible for clarifying and foregrounding the need for a philosophically general approach to rethinking questions of photographic form as they remain important for thinking about the specificities of cultural difference the transformation of photography theory was meant to conceptualise.

Claire Pajaczkowska's "Structure and Pleasure" articulates a variant of this critical position with explicit reference to Merleau-Ponty. A number of important historical questions are raised in this essay. She writes some fifteen years after the irruption of semiotics in English language criticism, when the radicality of a Saussurian model of semiotic theory had been in many ways accepted into academic discourse and, she complains, had also been overtaken by the relativism characterising its postmodern applications.

> Semiotics is now fully compatible with a cybernetic Imaginary, which has severed 'information' from its basis in the mechanics of power. As an endlessly additive pursuit with new definitions of signification proliferating, semiotics is taught as an autonomous discipline within 'communication studies'. The once revolutionary concept of the 'arbitrariness' of the signifier's relation to its referent has now been lost in the dense fogs of postmodernism.[6]

It is in this context that she writes:

> Within contemporary writing the battle between word and image has been fought for a long time, usually taking the form of an imperialist struggle for ownership of territory, the territory being the power to define academic disciplines. These arguments for the primacy of the image usually come from versions of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, or less philosophical and more literary assumptions that are implicit in much art history (Coleridge seems to be a favourite, especially his concept of the "imaginative faculty"). These arguments claim that the image is a separate and more primary form of communication than language, that it is truer, and that its special truth cannot really be discussed in language. Others, attempting to incorporate that analysis of visual meaning systems within wider semiological systems, extend their analytic classifications to include images as subsystems of language; such as the work of Eco, Metz and C. S. Pierce. Pierce's classification of a tripartite sign

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[6] Claire Pajaczkowska, "Structure and Pleasure", originally published in *Block*, no. 9, 1983, and reprinted in the *Block Reader in Visual Culture*, London & New York: Routledge, 1996 (from which all references here are taken), p. 31.

composed of an icon, index and symbol which correspond to analogical, metonymic and arbitrary relations of signifier to referent is one which has been used in this way.[7]

One might be sympathetic to Pajaczkowska's general argument and want to side with her critique of any assertion of pre-linguistic communicative value. However, the Lacanian model she proffers in their place would have, at the very least, to be examined in terms of its own deep indebtedness to the traditions of post-Kantian aesthetics and Husserlian phenomenology, especially as these pertain to the task of historical understanding of the 'classical' tradition. Such an inquiry might go some way to clarifying the misreadings of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that her criticism is obviously aimed at and also participates in. To collapse his thesis of the 'primacy of perception' into one concerning the 'primacy of the image' is quite simply unwarranted, regardless of whether one reads Merleau-Ponty sympathetically or critically.

The history of this reception cuts across many of the most important cultural debates of the last decades of the twentieth century. Viewing these through the prism of Merleau-Ponty's works and their influence would be a critically productive historical project and, to date, these relations remain unexamined in such explicit terms. Such a history would have to take account of stringent forms of rejection such as those described above as well as a whole range of partial readings and misunderstandings (both productive and not). However, a comprehensive elaboration of the relationships between cultural uses and rejections of Merleau-Pontian ideas is not the purpose of this thesis. The focus here is on photographic-art practices that require their own detailed characterisation and argumentation. The point of relation here is that the objects under discussion in this thesis do not appear immediately explicable in terms of the familiar themes and concerns that structure Merleau-Ponty's philosophy nor in the terms that

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[7] Ibid., p. 34.

have informed almost all prior cultural appeals to it. This fact offers a way into thinking about what relevance Merleau-Ponty has for the understanding of photography as conceived through photographic art practices.[8]

For instance, one of the most important aspects of the lack of apparent relevance of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to recent photographic practice is associated with the fact that the ascendancy of photography to an undeniable art status was facilitated by the manner in which it featured in conceptual art practices as a challenge to the precedence given perception.[9] Indeed, oddly enough, when assessing the role of Merleau-Pontian ideas in relation to photographic practice, conceptual art is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that many such practices turned to photography as a relatively neutral or mundane documentary form that had a sense of the extra artistic.

Peter Osborne gives an account of the abiding importance of perception as an object of critique for conceptual art. It is worth stressing this relation in order to counter the notion that contemporary art exists within a sphere effectively founded in the fact that the art movements of the 1960s and early 1970s 'cleared the ground' for subsequent practice, granting an aura of criticality or of conceptuality. In many senses this relation entails the straightforward celebration of market driven relativism, which allows an uncritical return to perception in the name of an only apparently conceptual, or critical, art.

> One should be wary of replacing too narrowly historical and critically sectarian a definition of conceptual art, such as Kosuth's '*purely* conceptual art' [...] by the more general notion of 'conceptualism'—understood to denote a broad change in 'attitude' towards the art object as 'materially constituted and visually privileged'. For such an inclusive attitudinal definition marks out a terrain that almost all contemporary art inhabits:

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[8] Critical works that deal explicitly with the various roles Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has been allocated in recent cultural debates are few. Perhaps the most notable are: Amelia Jones, "Meaning, Identity, Embodiment: The Uses of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology in Art History", and Alex Potts, "Art Works, Utterances, and Things", both in *Art & Thought*, Dana Arnold & Margaret Iverson eds., Malden Massachusetts & Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, pp. 71-90, & 91-110, respectively.

[9] See the texts by Pajaczkowska and Burgin, discussed above.

> 'conceptual*ism*' is more or less coextensive with 'contemporary art'. Yet for all its conceptuality, most contemporary art has a far less critical, and less troubled, relationship to the object of visual perception than a properly—that is, polemically—conceptual art.[10]

This situation is of special interest in the current context because of the centrality to conceptual art of photography and changing assumptions about its perceptual characteristics in critical discourse on the subject. Indeed, in many ways recent photographic practices and historical discourse on conceptual art share in the tendency to emphasise some kind of post-conceptual lineage and to do so with an increasing emphasis on the perceptual conditions of works produced within this context.[11]

It has become quite conventional recently to acknowledge photography as having been central to the development of conceptual art, as is expressed in the following critical description: "If photography played a key role in conceptualism's aim of problematising dominant notions of art and the art object, it did not simply provide a means by which this process was to be "documented" but actually provided the actual arena in which it was to be acted out".[12]

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[10] Peter Osborne (ed.), *Conceptual Art*, London & New York: Phaidon, 2002, p. 18.

[11] One recent example of an attempt to write a history of conceptual art that refigures its challenges to perception as a series of determinate negations of medium specificity, (which thus appear to place further emphasis on perception rather than to dissolve or disavow it) is offered by Ann Rorimer in, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2001, pp. 83-9. For instance, note the manner in which she privileges the work of Daniel Buren as her core model for such art and, perhaps especially, her discussion of the historical fate of relations between perception and idea in Robert Barry's *Inert Gas Series* from the late 1960s. In terms specific to art historical and curatorial attempts to make sense of the ubiquity of photography in contemporary art one can note a distinctive trend towards making appeal to an existential notion of the 'worlds' projected by certain practices and genres of photographic art as is made emphatic in the following quotation from the catalogue to a recent survey exhibition of photographic art in the Walker Art Centre Collection:

> The artists represented in the exhibition looked at photography instrumentally, as a means to an end, taking up the camera as a tool as they pursued a wide range of experimental agendas, be they sculptural, performative, or even painterly. The scope of the photographic practices and the subjects that they explore is diverse, moving from revisionist investigations of the legacy of the traditional artistic genre of the landscape to visual explorations of nonsequiturs and the absurd to equally challenging explorations of ethnic and gender identity through the use of masquerade in self-portraiture. Whether or not these artists saw themselves primarily as photographers (some did, and many did not), their wide-ranging practices are linked by what at times might seem like an extraphotogrpahic impulse to launch themselves into the world—or, more concretely, into a multiplicity of photographic worlds of their own making.

Douglas Fogle, "The Last Picture Show", in the catalogue to the exhibition *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982*, ed. and curated by Douglas Fogle, Minneapolis: Walker Art Centre, 2003-4, p. 10.

[12] David Green and Joanna Lowry, "Rethinking Photographic Indexicality", p. 49.

More significantly, perhaps, Jeff Wall's now canonical text: "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art" has come to be accepted as describing the importance of photography for conceptual art and the relation thus established between conceptual art and modernism.[13]

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[13] Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art", originally published in *Reconsidering the Object of Art: 1965-1975*, eds. Goldstein and Rorimer, London & Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995, pp. 247-67. Since its publication in this exhibition catalogue this quite remarkable essay has been taken up by many critics and theorists as the most cogent description of the role of photography in conceptual art. In it, Wall crystallises his long-standing critique of the 'mausoleum aesthetics' of conceptual art and its problematic and, on his view, ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to radicalise the formal auto-critical questioning that had been taken to define modernism in the post World War II American context as this was dominated by Greenberg's critical theory of art. For a thoroughgoing critical reading of this essay and its significance in relation to Wall's photographic practice see Stewart Martin's forthcoming article, "Wall's Tableaux Morts", which will be published in an upcoming special issue of the *Oxford Art Journal* on Wall, edited by Steve Edwards.
Martin is one of few critics who adopt an actually critical point of view on Wall's incredibly successful artwork and its relation to his remarkable critical writings. Significantly, in recent years art historical and critical discourse and certain photographic practices, have found in Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* a critically and historically regressive, support for a phenomenologically oriented photographic-art that centres on the painterly category of the tableau. This tendency presents historically complex claims on contemporary culture in the form of a return to early modernism, taken to act as an antidote to the close association between photography and twentieth century avant-gardism. This tendency has found, latterly, a distinctly phenomenological articulation that is deeply indebted to Barthes conception of photographic experience. I refer here to the complex relations between recent art histories of nineteenth century painting and recent photographic-art, most notably centred on the photographs and writings of Jeff Wall and elaborated in a set of critical essays that, together, are emerging as an influential tendency in contemporary writing on photography and that take as their focus a certain circumscribed notion of art photography. This tendency is important, if problematic. It is focussed on the critical constitution of Jeff Wall's return to Baudelaire's notion of the "painting of modern life" in his large scale photographic transparencies, which are supported by a series of remarkable, occasional essays authored by the artist, notably, "Unity and Fragmentation in Manet", *Parachute*, no. 35, Summer 1984, and of course the "Marks of Indifference" essay. The implications of Wall's project are articulated quite generally and with respect to the history of photography in Jean François Chevrier's essay, "The Adventures of the Picture [Tableau] Form in the History of Photography", originally published in the exhibition catalogue, *Photo-Kunst: Arbeiten aus 150 Jahren*, Stuttgart: Grapsiche Sammlung, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, 1989, and also republished in *The Last Picture Show*, pp. 113-28. The conception of a photographic-art saturated with painterly concerns that is developed in these essays forms the critical horizon of Michael Fried's recent interventions into photographic criticism. See the more substantial "Barthes's *Punctum*" and the more occasional "Being There: Michael Fried on Two Pictures by Jeff Wall" in *Artforum*, September 2004, pp. 53-4. The literature on Wall is understandably massive, but strangely, almost completely celebratory. For a refreshingly critical, alternative account of the major issues in Wall's return to Baudelaire and a brief critical discussion of the almost universally positive critical reception his photographic work has received, see Stewart Martin's entry for "Jeff Wall", in *Art: Key Contemporary Thinkers*, Diarmuid Costello and Jonathan Vickery (eds.), London: Berg, 2006, (forthcoming). Its brevity and introductory character make it all the more remarkable that this short text is one of very few that treats Wall's position seriously and with a critical eye. In this as yet unpublished text, which I thank him for copying to me, Martin writes:

> The response to Wall's project—which has for obvious reasons focused overwhelmingly on his photographs rather than his writings—has been remarkably sympathetic and uncontroversial. Certainly, his detractors have kept a low profile to date. Wall's cinematographic pictorialism seems matched only by the serialized documentary of the Becher's in its influence on the terms of contemporary art-photography. Furthermore, the responses to Wall's work have largely remained within the parameters that he has outlined in his writings. A remarkable feature of this unanimous response has been the convergence of otherwise opposed positions. Thus, Wall's insistence on the significance of Conceptual Art and his attempt to recover an alternative genealogy of modernism

In light of debates around perception as an aesthetic category one might claim, polemically, that the present historical conjuncture is one in which art critical and historical understanding seems to be defined as occupying a terrain opened up by minimalism and/or conceptual art as quasi-epoch making claims on what remains possible for and as art. The fact that one may be able to list more factors, such as Pop Art for instance, merely indicates that in this situation a lot depends upon where one locates one's breaks and defining moments and what values one attributes to them. It would be too simplistic to assert the criticism that even the most conceptual artworks turned out to have a perceptible form of some kind or, conversely, to assert an older, perhaps, pre-avant-gardist form for art (such as a conception of photographic art organised around the pre-modernist picture form of the tableaux). What is important is the meaning of the residual centrality of the perceptual in a putatively post-conceptual and post-minimalist art.[14] One of the effects of both of these historical conditions is that they mark a complex and contested, but nonetheless discernible, point at which the concept of art was subject to a novel form of generalisation as a concern for the status of

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in the light of its lessons, is largely consistent with the transformation of academic art history from the 1970s, which rejected Greenberg's formalist modernism and revised his account of late 19th and early 20th century modernism. However, Wall elaborates autonomous art-photography as the self-criticism of its medium, and insists on understanding avant-garde experimentation as productive of the autonomy and tradition of art, rather than its negation, in a way that Greenberg emphasized. De Duve has argued that, in photographs like 'Picture for Women' (1979), Wall remains true to Greenberg's preoccupations by revealing the 'surface' specific to photography.

This convergence should not be mistaken for reconciliation, but it begs the question of what terms a more radical disagreement with Wall's project would take. Ostensibly, this would revolve around a re-assertion of the claims of the radical avant-gardes, which Wall has consistently positioned himself against. (Remarkably, Bürger does not criticise him for this.) Wall's retrospective reading of the painting of modern life has sought to suppress its avant-gardist dimension, recovering academicism against transgression. But we need to question whether this has resulted in a perversion of its terms of criticism. Wall's insistence on the art historical precedents of his pictures, studiously followed by his commentators, often renders them 'contemporary dress dramas' that are just as withdrawn from the contemporary image culture in which they need to be judged as the history painting Baudelaire denounced. And his pictures have singularly failed to achieve the scandalousness that marked Manet's critical academicism.

Martin, (Unpaginated manuscript.)

[14] One might, here, contrast Osborne's position, which is structured around the claim that the condition of contemporary art is 'post-conceptual' with that of Michael Fried for whom contemporary art is, on his view unfortunately, defined by its 'post-minimalist' (or as he would have it, its 'literalist') fate.

the particular artwork in relation to the concept of art as such (rather than the specific conditions of one or other medium, historical form or tradition).

Photographic art has come to span, in the period since the 1970s, a whole range of claims on just such a generic conceptualisation of art. Indeed, one can also think of its ubiquity in the art world (not just as a 'work', but as functional document, reproduction, illustration, etc) as a formal register of its status in respect of general claims on the very notion of art. Whilst Merleau-Pontian aesthetics may seem inappropriate or uninformative for immanent analysis of many such claims on art, it does promise to be very valuable in understanding what has happened to such claims historically through the expansion of the photographic in virtually all aspects of art practices.

The reception of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in debates on art can, at least initially, be described by remarking two major tendencies: There are those that have drawn on his explicit writings on art and there are those have tended to sidestep his aesthetics in favour of themes articulated in more general philosophical works. Nevertheless, in different ways and with varying degrees of reflexivity, most cultural appeals to Merleau-Ponty's thought have taken as their focus his concepts of perception, embodiment and space and the relationships between them. More often than not, these three concepts have been applied to artistic practices in ways determined by obvious analogies drawn between the critical view of perception emphasised and the kinds of object they are taken to explain. Sometimes this has proven valuable and interesting and other times not. One symptom of this tendency is that, these concepts have been read in ways that disassociate them from the intrinsically socio-historical and, importantly, political frameworks within which they and the phenomenon they describe are interrogated by Merleau-Ponty.

Notably, such conventional methodological analogies have tended to avoid photographic works. Yet, if Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is taken to have continuing purchase on what the concepts of space, perception and embodiment describe and, furthermore, if they are taken to give convincing grounds to think that they are in general terms socially and historically articulated, then one should be able to give account of photography in these terms. Indeed, as (arguably the dominant image form of the twentieth century) this connection between photography and perception at a worldwide social level is highly suggestive. The analyses presented here take the view that there is a general analogy to be made between the world/body relation as a term in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and the world encompassing and mediating forms taken by photography and that this relation is mediated critically in certain art practices. A brief discussion of two pertinent examples will clarify some of the central issues at stake and how they might be addressed in terms of photographic art practices.

These examples date from the late 1960s and early 1970s and involve different uses of photography and text to explore questions of embodiment and perception. They are artworks made by Ketty La Rocca and Mel Bochner that stand historically at pivotal points in debates on the character and value of perception as a category that could orient or inform the production and understanding of art. Mel Bochner's use of photography in the late 1960s, in large part, stands as a critique of the modular character of minimalist art objects. Ketty La Rocca 's use of photographs seeks to intervene into conventional representations of gender and to problematise these as alienated relationships between desiring bodies. Both practices make explicit reference to Merleau-Ponty and use photography critically, though in different ways. Discussion of these artworks will also serve to introduce some of the key terms of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics in relation to his wider philosophical project.

In 1966, Mel Bochner compiled a list of quotations about photography for an article he submitted to *Artforum* entitled "Dead Ends and Vicious Circles". The article was rejected, but he kept the quotations and went on, a few years later, to use some of them as material for another work, *Misunderstandings: A Theory of Photography* (1967-70, fig. 1). Nine quotations about photography, or relating to familiar themes in photographic discourse, were hand written on index cards, photographed, reproduced as photo-offset prints and presented as an edition in manila envelopes. Their authors include many writers whose works have come, frequently, to be mined for their comments upon photography, as well as others much less familiar within this sphere. Three of the nine quotations were, so the story goes, made up by Bochner. [15]

The quotations comprise a complex set of references to photography and its critical discourses as is indicated by the quotation from Taine, which registers the impact of technical images on positivist thought in nineteenth century France and also a further,

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[15] *Misunderstandings: A Theory of Photography* was published as a print edition in 1969 for the exhibition, *Artists and Photographs* at the Multiples Gallery in New York: it was distributed in a box containing contributions from 19 artists and a text by Laurence Alloway (that was published in *Studio International*, no. 179, April 1970, pp. 162-4, and later in *The Last Picture Show*, pp. 20-1). The authors of the statements reproduced by Bochner are: James J. Gibson, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Emile Zola, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hypolite Taine, Marcel Proust, Marcel Duchamp, Mao Tse-tung and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. For discussions of this work that place it in the context of Bochner's engagement with photography during the late 1960s, see, Scott Rothkopf, "'Photography Cannot Record Abstract Ideas' and Other Misunderstandings", in *Mel Bochner: Photographs 1966-1969*, ed. Scott Rothkopf, New Haven, London and Cambridge: Yale University Press and Harvard University Art Museums, 2002, pp. 1-49; and Sasha M. Newman, "The Photo Pieces" in *Mel Bochner: Thought Made Visible*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Art Gallery, 1995, pp. 114-9. Bochner struggled to maintain a distance from conceptual art throughout the period in question: "I never really considered myself a conceptual artist because I cannot separate conception from perception" as quoted by James Mayer in "The Second Degree: *Working Drawings And Other Visible Things On Paper Not Necessarily Meant To Be Viewed As Art*", *Mel Bochner: Thought Made Visible*, p. 106. Rothkopf discusses Bochner's photographic works as developing from the critique of minimalism towards an uneasy engagement with conceptual art in, "'Photography Cannot Record Abstract Ideas". He relates Bochner's exaggeration of photographic distortions of perspective to documents of minimalist works such as Robert Morris's *Untitled (Two L-Beams)* of 1968 (p. 15); to the "deadpan seriality" of Walker Evans and Ed Ruscha's photographs of vernacular architecture (pp. 8-10) and to the serial form of Marey, Eakins and Muybridge's motion studies (pp. 12-3).

implicit level of prior quotation by Siegfried Kracauer in his survey of attitudes to photography in *Theory of Film* of 1960.[16] Also notable is the quotation attributed Mao, which echoes the centrality of photography as a vehicle for the radical transformation of art practice characteristic of the earlier twentieth century. The quotation from Duchamp was used in Bochner's *Four Comments Concerning "Photograph-Blocks: Project for a Monument Exhibition"*, a text work made in early 1967 that was photographically produced to include quotations from Webster's Dictionary, John Daniels and Sartre as well as Duchamp (see fig., 1). Field draws attention to these works (and particularly the quotation from Sartre: "Things are entirely what they appear to be") as indicating Bochner's critique of the "macho certainty" of minimalist art. He contrasts this to the following comment by Bochner in review of the exhibition *Systematic Painting*:

> A work of art by its existence is a fabricated reality. As an object, which is man made (or chosen), and also part of the inanimate world but not natural and also not utilitarian, it has an ambiguous existence. Phenomenon [sic] are impenetrable by thought and exist non-ambiguously as they exist preceding definition. But a work of art is the product of thought which produces the actual work. Now that art has freed itself from both referential land abstract burdens artists face a new paradox. Is ambiguity inherent in the thing or is it created by ambiguous elements?[17]

Also included in each envelope was another card depicting the negative image from a 'peel apart' Polaroid. The status of this image in the context is ambiguous and it complicates the way this work addresses general theoretical claims on what photography is by introducing notions of embodiment as a problem for photographic representation and compounding the complexities of photographic space (in terms of scale and location) and time (in terms of relations between precedence and consequence).

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[16] Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of film: The Redemption of Physical Reality, Princeton*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997.
[17] Mel Bochner, "Systematic", *Arts Magazine*, No. 41, November 1966, p. 40.

Fig. 1: Mel Bochner, *Misunderstandings: A Theory of Photography*, 1967-70.

The negative image included in this work is a reproduction of a Polaroid photograph Bochner produced in whilst making an earlier piece entitled, *Actual Size (Hand)* in 1966-7 (fig. 2), which was one of two (the other being *Actual Size (Face)* (fig. 3)) made using the same process spanning different camera and print formats.[18]

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[18] These works came out of conversations that Bochner had with a group of research and development scientists during his residency at the Singer laboratories, New Jersey in the autumn of 1968. Bochner talks about the genesis of the photographic works under discussion here in an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist (published at: http://www.e-flux.com/projects/do_it/notes/interview/i003_text.html):

> [M. B.] Anyway, many of the ideas weren't meant to be realized, they were pure speculation, meant to provoke the conversation, because it was clear to me that the conversation themselves were "the project." The

The images in the *Actual Size* works depict Bochner's forearm and face positioned against a wall on which are set two Lettraset bars and the sign '12"' to designate the distance separating them. Bochner had 22" x 17¾", silver gelatin prints made up from the Polaroid's (a process that involved some vertical cropping to make the surfaces depicted appear flatter, compare figs., 1 and 2), this scale being determined by his desire to reproduce his face and arm to their actual size. Rothkopf describes the effects of this conceptual determination on the images.

> The works' titles *Actual Size (Face)* and *Actual Size (Hand)*, imply no scale shift between Bochner's body and its representation. To make good on the titles' promise that the images be actual size, Bochner need only instruct the photo lab to print the final pictures so that the '12"' mark in the image occupied exactly twelve inches on the paper. Bochner later recalled that in making the pictures 'actual size' he had hoped the photograph might somehow invisibly summon his body parts without any mediation, so that 'nothing would be left other than the face and the hand, and the photographs would essentially disappear".[19]

This insistence on actual size did involve a series of shifts in scale, but in terms of what one sees these disappear in the final images. This is a fact that incorporates a sense of abstraction into the staging of the idea of correspondence. Perhaps one could even say that such relations remain in the works as a visual paradox; the scalar shift literalised as dis-appearing. All of the critical weight in this work thus falls on what the term 'essentially' might mean in Bochner's description of such relations. I would interpret this as describing the 'play' on the relationship between what is 'perceptible' and what is 'conceptual', or what one sees and how it informs one of elisions,

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conversations often centred around the idea of objectification—how can we find a common language, and that invariably came down to some form of measurement. It was about how experience can be communicated, and at the same time, the fallibility of every measurement system.
[H. U. O.] No absolute.
[M. B.] Exactly and that's where perception came into the equation.
[H. U. O.] Perhaps there are some connections with Merleau-Ponty?
[M. B.] In a way, very close to his ideas. The first measurement piece that I did was for the sake of the conversation. I secretly went around the laboratory measuring things, marking dimensions on the walls and floors with Lettraset numbers. [...] I had photographs taken of these interventions and when I looked at the photographs the interesting thing was that there was no way to know the actual size of the object in the photograph [for instance, one depicting a spray can]. So I next drew twelve inches on the wall and photographed myself against it, then gave the negative to the printer and asked him to print it so that the measurement in the print would be exactly twelve inches, or actual size. By doing that the photograph became the index of the index, or a vicious circle. That, for me, was the end of photography.

[19] Rothkopf, "'Photography Cannot Record Abstract Ideas' and Other Misunderstandings", pp. 37-8. (Bochner's recollections regarding these works were made in conversation with Rothkopf in 2000.)

differences and paradoxes as a subtle presentation of photographic relations between what more conventionally be taken to be the separate realms of concepts and percepts.

Figs. 2 & 3, Mel Bochner, *Actual Size (Hand)* (left) and *Actual Size (Face)* (right), both 1968.

The print form of the images of Bochner in the earlier works is ambiguous for a number of reasons, most notably because Polaroid photographs do not have a separate negative stage from which positives need to be made.[20] This is an arbitrary kind of

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[20] Polaroid photography takes different forms amongst which are the 'professional' and 'domestic' formats in which a print is produced by chemical processes contained in peel apart or sealed units. All Polaroid photography *does* in fact depend upon a negative stage, but one that is *integral* and not separate. These common Polaroid formats rely on modular units that contain and order all of the chemicals needed to register and develop a negative, which is then subjected to a multiple stage reversal process (diffusion-transfer) to produce a positive. This necessitates three main components in the film/print unit: a surface coated with a light sensitive silver halide emulsion, a layer that 'receives' the image developed in this emulsion and further materials (and mechanisms to control their release and operation) that serve different functions to transfer the image from the former to the latter. In terms of the images produced using this process, one significant factor to consider is that the hardware necessitated to contain and organise these processes (cameras, camera backs, film holders and processors) is as integral to the image form as the chemical reactions it facilitates. The process and the final image produced in colour Polaroid photography using self-contained units, relies on setting the whole arrangement of coloured dyes against an opaque background and at least one intermediate opacifying layer to protect stages of development and facilitate the separation of colours in the final print. This means that light is unable to travel through the unit to be exposed, in marked contrast to negative or reversal films that are exposed through the celluloid backing carrying their emulsion. Cameras designed for self-contained film/print units house a mirror that reverses the lens image laterally so that exposure can take place on the front of the unit. This serves to complicate the forms of inversion that characterise the concepts of negative and positive and the spatio-temporal terms in which this occurs bear directly upon the perception of the images produced. Simply put, the negative image that forms the first stage of development later serves as a component part of the depth arrangement that produces tonal and colour distinctions. This 'flat', 'still' image has a certain significant depth and this depth has, so to speak, its own integral temporality. Though these functions

reproduction that mixes up the specific characteristics of different photographic formats whilst stressing the fact that it is 'as forms' that they have become mixed. In the earlier works, Polaroid's relative singularity, instantaneity and immediacy are forced, so to speak, into the constitutively distanced spatio-temporal relation that characterises the negative form and reproductions made from it. A highly reflexive approach to photography is integral to the gesture of *Actual Size (Hand)* and *(Face)*. Space and time, figured technically in terms of predetermined possibilities of scale and precedence, achieve a certain kind of correspondence whilst rendering the sense of this relation dubious. The process of producing a photo-lithographic print from the Polaroid negative to which the image of Bochner's hand was subjected in *Misunderstandings*, involved further stages, the making of a celluloid negative, its reproduction as a plate and the production of a series of prints taken from this. The conceptual implications of such shifts are made emphatic in *Misunderstandings* as the reproduced negative is set within the context of claims as to what photography *is*, in a way that compounds discursive assertions of cognitive value with perceptually ambiguous yet representational objecthood.[21] One might think of this as subject to a further, ironic, gesture insofar as

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remain invisible in the product they literally facilitate what one sees in the final print. The celebrated 'immediacy' of the Polaroid image is contingent upon such considerations just as, by extension, any understanding of the uses to which it has been, or may be, put as an 'instantaneous' image form are also. (Consider this, say, in terms of the relationship between hardware, chemical process and resulting image as these determined the domestic Polaroid's use as a mainstay of amateur pornography (as an intrinsically "private" process that was ready for "use" quite quickly) before the development and widespread availability of digital technology, which is a further factor that also introduces considerations of the specific historicity of Polaroid formats.) The relations between what is thus "visible" and the role of what remains "invisible" in the technically structured singularity of Polaroid images would prove, perhaps, fertile ground for development of more incisive terms and informed analyses of the practices they have facilitated. For instance, one might think of the metaphoric relation such uses of the medium suggest in terms of the different senses of frontality, whether technical, material or bodily as these are rendered in terms of what is visible and what remains, arguably, its invisible corollary. For a technical account of the development and various forms of Polaroid photography and an explanation of the process of diffusion transfer, see Leslie Stroebel and Richard Zakia eds., *The Focal Encyclopaedia of Photography*, 3rd edition, Boston & London: Focal Press, 1993, pp. 641-2 and 215-6, respectively.

[21] Bochner describes this aspect of Misunderstandings in the interview with Obrist cited above:

> [M. B.] When I realized in 1967, that my work had become about photography without wanting it to—I thought, I should do some research, look into the history of the medium and find out what's been written about it, what the issues are. What I found was really pretty dumb—it had no value in any theoretical terms. And the more I read,

the reproduction of the Polaroid reasserts something very much like its original scale as it is printed near to, if not exactly at, its first 'actual' size.[22]

The quotations are reproduced and presented according to a set of relations between plurality and singularity. The title written on the envelope is itself marked by this relation: the plural "misunderstandings" is qualified in the parenthesis that follows it—"a theory of photography"—in a way that draws attention to the conflicted character of photographic discourse and signals the indeterminacy of Bochner's treatment of both text and image. These multiple, but numerically limited, claims on photography address it in historical, aesthetic, political and epistemological terms and are themselves transformed into generic records of the medium to which they refer; they are literalised as competing *indices* of photography. The result is not however, as Bochner claims

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the more I began to see it all as a colossal misunderstanding. So I started compiling a set of misunderstandings. After a while I had quite a large number of these quotations which I wanted to publish. The first title was "Dead Ends and Vicious Circles" [...] I submitted it to *Artforum* but Philip Leader said 'we're not a goddamn photography magazine, this is an art magazine, don't give me anything on photography, we don't do photography!' Then I sent it to *Art in America* and they were not interested either, but suggested that I send it to a photography magazine! Like *Popular Photography*! Well I knew that no photography magazine could possibly be interested in this, so I put it in a drawer and forgot about it. Then in 1970, Marian Goodman, who then had a gallery called Multiples Gallery, came up with the idea of doing a boxed multiple set of artists' photographs. She made this box which was quite an amazing thing, it had Smithson, Graham, Ruscha, Dibbets, Rauschenberg, LeWitt, myself and a number of other artists. My contribution was a version of "Dead Ends and Vicious Circles", a compilation of quotations I titled *Misunderstandings (A Theory of Photography)*. And to further add to the confusion, three of the quotes were fakes, I made them up. The last card in the envelope is a reproduction of a negative of a Polaroid, but of course Polaroids don't have negatives!

[22] Photo-offset lithography was, until fairly recently, a conventional mode of reproduction of text in many spheres of practice, not least in book production and for gallery display panels. The increasingly historical character of the 'photographic' aspects of this process are interesting in the current context. Its use by Bochner in *Misunderstandings* also suggests some interesting parallels to other uses of juxtaposed textual fragments. One might productively relate it, for instance, to Sarah Charlesworth and Barbara Kruger's later, postmodernist, arrangement of similar textual fragments, *Glossolalia*, (originally published in *Bomb*, no. 5, Spring 1983, pp. 60-1). This later work employs a 'constellatory' strategy to juxtapose quotations about photography. However, it involves little or no reflexivity vis-à-vis the material forms of the conventional reproduction and dissemination of such text. The questions of material form raised here can also be considered in relation to two of Bochner's *Theory of Painting* works of the period 1969-70, (which comprise in newspaper pages spread of the floor with a rectangle of blue paint sprayed in their centre, one *(Cohere/Cohere)* contrasting the painted area with the orderly rectangular shape of the laid out pages and another *(Cohere/Disperse)* in which the pages are scattered quite chaotically in contrast to the blue rectangle at their centre). In these works, the graphic character of adverts, photographs and their relation to the printed text (and the repetition of these as the same pages from different copies of the papers appear close to each other) suggests an inverse approach to some of the issues raised by *Misunderstandings*. Perhaps, in terms of material reflections on such forms of juxtaposition these works could also be productively thought in relation to the "anthology" of quotations that ends Susan Sontag's *On Photography* (London & New York: Penguin, 1977, pp. 183-207) as many of her quotations are extracted from newspaper and billboard advertisements and are set into a critical framework that bemoans the derogative effects of photography on the specificity of earlier image forms.

"The end of photography", but rather, a complex mediation of differing and tendentious ends to which it might be put that extend over different technical, material and conceptual spheres. One can think of photography on this basis as being a theoretical object with multiple ends, but also as incorporating a slippage between the relative primacy of these ends. One might further characterise this complication of photographic discourse as a kind of technically mediated phenomenological doubt, or as a photographic doubt.

Here, with critical reservations, on can make a link to Villem Flusser's notion of the photographic 'gesture' and the form of phenomenological indeterminacy that is specific to it: "The act of photography is that of 'phenomenological doubt' to the extent that it attempts to approach phenomena from any number of viewpoints. But the 'mathesis' of this doubt (its deep structure) is prescribed by the camera's programme".[23] Just what Flusser thinks the photographic 'programme' is will come up later in discussion of the work of Emilio Prini. For the moment it is important to note that it stands as being roughly cognate with Roland Barthes notion of the instrumental and alienating form of photographic experience. The general claim that Flusser makes vis-à-vis cultural indeterminacy is critically unsupportable. Nonetheless his description of the structure of photographic doubt does seem to be apposite to discussion of Bochner's photographic works. One of the major points of making this connection is to draw out the manner in which Bochner's conception of such doubt entails an emphasis on the relation between the human and the technological as these are seen to be inherently mediated in the conflicted register of photographic mediation of concept and percept.

It is conventional to note in discussion of Merleau-Ponty's work that it places normative ideas of truth in photography in question. It does so through this range of

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[23] Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Matthews, London: Reaktion Books, 2000, p. 38.

inversions and shifts between photographic media and the relational issues of scale and precedence they structure as well as in terms of the relative indeterminacy or lack of completion that the quotations and the interminability of photographic reproduction signify. Two of the statements reproduced in it are pertinent in this light. J. J. Gibson is quoted as having written: "Photographs provide for a kind of experience that is mediated instead of direct [...] what might be called 'perception at second hand'". This is a psychologically articulated comment on photographic realism that is quite pragmatic in the way it describes a moment of alienation, but does not take this to be troubling for discourse on perception. The other is taken from Merleau-Ponty's last published essay, "Eye and Mind": "The photograph keeps open the instants, which the onrush of time closes up; it destroys the overtaking, the overlapping of time".[24] It is worth quoting the passage from which this fragment is taken more fully here in order to contextualise this claim and its relation to *Misunderstandings*. It comes at the end of a brief discussion of Rodin's comments on his treatment of temporal dislocation in the composition of sculptural works and a comparison of these to Cézanne's painterly treatment of perception as a temporal enigma and as an objective problem of representation.

> The painting itself would then offer to my eyes almost the same thing offered to them by real movements: a series of appropriately mixed, instantaneous glimpses along with, if a living thing is involved, attitudes unstably suspended between a before and an after—in short, the externals of a change of place which the spectator would read from the imprint it leaves. [...] Movement is given, says Rodin, by an image in which the arms, the legs, the trunk, and the head are each taken at a different instant, an image which therefore portrays the body in an attitude which it never at any instant really held and which imposes fictive linkages between the parts, as if this mutual confrontation of incompossibles could—and alone could—cause transition and duration to arise in bronze and on canvas. [...] Each member's position, precisely by virtue of its incompossibility with that of the others (according to the body's logic), is dated differently or is not "in time" with the others; and since all of them remain visibly within the unity of one body, it is the body which comes to bestride duration. [...] The photograph keeps open the rush of instants, which the onrush of time closes up forthwith; it destroys the overtaking, the overlapping, the "metamorphosis" [Rodin] of time.

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[24] This is the translation (or paraphrase) that Bochner used, I take the liberty from here onwards of using the later and now standard translation of this sentence in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. Michael B. Smith, Evanston, Illinois, Northwestern University Press, 1993, p. 144-5.

The quotation from Gibson articulates the spatio-temporal distancing function that characterises photographic images and Merleau-Ponty relates this same idea, critically, to a phenomenological account of aesthetic experience. The formation of the relative kinds of disharmony and incompletion that Merleau-Ponty describes stand as a specifically modern challenge to the classical tradition of representational composition. The "mutual confrontation of incompossibles" in Rodin (as in Cézanne's perspective distortions) describes as deeply ambiguous intentional acts each moment of inscription, addition or subtraction in the process of making to place emphasis upon their status as registers of the gestures that produced them. This relation between the action of making and the fact that disjunctions between their results remain in the composition produces a representational object with a complex temporality that requires a basically reflective kind of perceptual activity on the part of the viewer.

In opposition to this (and contrary to the conventional notion of what the photographic apparatus's 'freezing', 'excerpting' and 'closing off' operations are taken to mean) the photograph, for Merleau-Ponty, has a temporality that holds a moment *open*. Temporality is characterised by Merleau-Ponty in terms of the durational aspect of lived experience, so this would mean that photographs are somehow contrary to the character of time itself. One can consider this in relation to how Merleau-Ponty describes time in a different context.

> Each present may claim to solidify our life, and indeed that is what distinguishes it as the present. In so far as it presents itself as the totality of being and fills an instant of consciousness, we never extricate ourselves completely from it, time never completely closes over it and it remains like a wound through which our strength ebbs away. [...] What enables us to centre our existence is also what prevents us from centring it completely, and the anonymity of our body is inseparably both freedom and servitude. Thus, to sum up, the ambiguity of being-in-the-world is translated by that of the body, and this is understood through that of time.[25]

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[25] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (1962), with revisions by Forest Williams (1978) and David Guerrière (1981), London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1981, p. 85.

Seen in relation to the later passage from "Eye and Mind"—"The photograph keeps open the rush of instants, which the onrush of time closes up forthwith; it destroys the overtaking, the overlapping, the "metamorphosis" [Rodin] of time"—the idea of time never really closing over the perceptual plenitude or "totality of being"—which, "remains like a wound through which our strength ebbs away"—in the present, might seem contradictory. But it describes the relation between immanence and transcendence in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy as this is worked out in terms of perception. The issues raised here are complex. For the moment it will suffice to stress that the fullness and immediacy of the perceptual present is possessed of, or better, *by* the meaning of what is encountered in and through time and that the description of this as happening in the manner of a wound that does not and will never heal is evocative of what Merleau-Ponty thinks perceptual experience is and how artworks might encourage one towards reflection on it. One thing is certain, he thinks this is not the character of the moment held open by the photograph, which is a position that seems to disallow consideration of perception in terms of photography.

An important difference in conceptions of art and its mediation of lived experience emerges in this comparison between Bochner's use of photographs and Merleau-Ponty's comments upon the medium in relation to painting and sculpture. It allows one to begin to separate Merleau-Ponty's promotion of certain modernist art practices from his more conceptually central conception of 'art', which can be described as an exemplary mode of the emergence of sense in perceptual as in cultural and historical modes and according to the ontological category of becoming.

The painting or sculpture, for Merleau-Ponty, achieves something of the durational torsion between immanence and transcendence in one's perceptual experience of it by dint of co-locations of incompossible moments (i.e., instances or states of things that

don't seem to belong together in the same moment but are, nonetheless, presented as simultaneous in the same representation and held in place by the relative consistency with which the contribute to the overall composition). It is of central importance that these moments are rendered visible, but in ways that rely on the artist adopting an intellectual, or conceptual attitude to the tradition of painterly and sculptural representation against which they react. In this light, one should note that *Misunderstandings* relates Polaroid and negative based photographic processes and the collected ensemble of claims on photography to the issues of scale and temporality addressed in *Actual Size (Hand)*. This earlier work presents a nuanced articulation of the problematic realism attributed to photographic images and sets this against the ways in which arbitrary measurements of Bochner's own body are registered by minimal indications of the location of this body in the depiction of its parts. One can describe the mediation of objects, times and spaces in Bochner's work in terms similar to Merleau-Ponty's account of art, but with the difference that the use of photography foregrounds modes of representational torsion, durational enigma and historical convention with a markedly different conceptual emphases on broadened social forms of technically mediated perceptual experience.

Seen synoptically, Bochner's work with photography can be read as shifting the relations of embodied perception that Merleau-Ponty finds in Cézanne and Rodin (as particular mediators of gestural behaviour and as representatives of a certain historical moment of modernism) into a more anonymously mediated technical-social sphere that is framed by a critical conception of what Bochner takes to be the shortcomings of modernist art. The complexity of the particular way in which these works treat relations between embodied perception and forms of technical image, their problematisation of theoretical claims on photography and the fact that all of these relations are projected as

interventions into the contemporaneous field of claims on the character and meaning of art, indicate a sense in which these works bear deep structural similarities to Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics. The fact that they do so in terms that stand in direct contradiction to certain central commitments of Merleau-Ponty's writings on art foregrounds a contradiction. The value of remarking this contradiction is not to reveal that these claims on the character of aesthetic experience are mutually exclusive but, rather, that their contradictory relation facilitates description of the actual historical mutation of perceptual experience as registered and critically interrogated by different cultural practices.

In this context, it is interesting that Richard Field describes Bochner's use of photography in terms that suggest a concern for the critical relation between the social conditions of art and perception as these are reoriented to make sense of technological forms: "Bochner's art continued the felt need, first broached by the Pop generation, to disclaim authorship and to deny responsibility for interpretation, to drain from art the expressive and exhortatory baggage of high modernism, and to shift responsibility for completing the work to the viewer, the receiver (Duchamp's prophetic dicta of 1953—the work of art was to be completed by its public)".[26] In an obvious sense Field's comment is too limited in its art historical purview when it claims Duchamp as the 'first' to have made this claim, but is also, nonetheless, specific in locating what this means in the sphere of relations between forms of technological mediation and the kinds of audience they might constitute. In this sense, one of the key figures of Merleau-Ponty's notion of aesthetic experience, the analogy that he establishes between the unfinished character of certain modernist art works and 'unfinishability' of perceptual experience, does find a register in Bochner's photographic works and it does so in a

[26] Richard S. Field, "Mel Bochner: Thought Made Visible" in *Mel Bochner: Thought Made Visible 1966-1973*, New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1995, p. 28.

way that is interpretable in terms broader than Field's limitation of such questions to narrowly conceived art history. Thus, one could read Bochner's engagement with photography in Merleau-Pontian terms that stress the interrogative and reflective procedures of relative indeterminacy that seek to understand the historical situation in which they unfold, rather than taking Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics to be defined by the specific art forms and historical moments they discuss.

> Bochner did [...] have a plan for photography, but luckily for him the camera didn't oblige. Like his contemporaries, he turned to the medium in part to serve an idea, but unlike many of them, he soon determined that photography could communicate ideas no more transparently than sculpture, or painting—or language, for that matter. Once adopted, the camera proved incorrigible, always interjecting unforeseen distortions and anomalies of its own device. Yet rather than ignore them, Bochner chose to seize upon these gaps between the "real" world and the camera's picture of it. Ultimately, it would be within the unique discursive and physical space of photography that he would come to formulate his mode of conceptual art, with its anxious and elegant negotiation between the linguistic and the perceptual.[27]

The photographs, *Actual Size (Face) & (Hand)* place the body of the artist, into a sphere of arbitrary determinations and minimal representative operations. It would seem, in this move, that the arbitrary characteristics of the measurements and their mediation are "anchored" in some way by the head and the forearm as signifiers of singular scalar values (Bochner's 'unique' body and, moreover, those parts of it most usually conceived of in sensory terms). Yet, the medium of this anchoring function, that which supports the realism of these photographic documents is also that which renders the relations of scale arbitrary and incorporates in this series of works a set of reflections on representational norms. His critique of the forms of self-evident embodied relation claimed by minimalist art objects operates through these demonstrations of the lack of transparency of photographic documents as modular and technical but, nonetheless, enigmatic objects. At risk of being overly metaphoric, one might describe this as a kind of double inversion in which photographs are *conceived* as being phenomenologically 'thick', despite all of the *perceptual* evidence to the contrary,

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[27] Rothkopf, "'Photography Cannot Record Abstract Ideas' and Other Misunderstandings", p. xi.

but only inasmuch as they speak to a world rendered perceptually 'thin' by the conventions of art under critique. The differences between Merleau-Ponty and Bochner would then be thinkable in terms of the value attributed to photography in this context and, indeed, without wanting to privilege either, this is a relation that I would want to emphasise. Whilst Bochner shares with Merleau-Ponty certain reservations with regard to conventional notions of photographic truth, he turns to these as problems that face the art of a time when the secure identity of its forms are under critique.

In Italy, at the beginning of the 1970s, Ketty La Rocca produced a series of works including photographs depicting hands isolated on a black background and inscribed with text. Many of these show pairs of hands touching each other in various ways, either in the same frame or in sequences of images. The photographic elements of these works were sometimes presented on their own and at other times were combined with drawings and text (figs., 4 & 5). Whilst what they show is quite ambiguous the photographs function as more or less straightforward documents. In contrast, the drawings attempt to indicate graphically the felt relation between the hands shown using more or less dense lines and areas of tone to indicate relative intensity of feeling and to locate specific areas of relation between them. According to the logic of these representational strategies, the drawings appear more directly linked to the hand that made them; they stand as a first person claim to represent the feelings that they and the photographs depict, so to speak. They do so through codified forms of abstraction, but are 'of the hand'. The photographs, whilst appearing more detailed and obviously showing the hands more directly, appear to be less intimately related to that which they depict. For instance, it is notable that the backs of the hands are more definitely gendered, whilst the palms, largely because they are lacking in hair, are much more ambiguous in this respect. This—and the fact that they are isolated on the black

background by a combination of black clothing and stark lighting—means that despite their representational fidelity it remains unclear whether the pairs of hands depicted in each photograph belong to the same body, to a body one can attribute a clear gender status or, indeed, to La Rocca herself.

In what little critical writing there is on her work, La Rocca is generally positioned as critically interrogating the gendered character of interpersonal relations in terms of identity and difference, as in the following comment: "[Her works'] power lies in the authenticity of its attempts to represent subjectivity and identity".[28] If, in respect of these works, authenticity is what makes them interesting, it is only because they address such questions in a highly attenuated form.

Fig. 4: Ketty La Rocca , *Dal momento in cui qualsiasi procedimento presuppone*, 1968.

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[28] Judith Russi Kirschner, "You and I: the art of Ketty La Rocca ", *Artforum*, March, 1993.

Fig. 5: Ketty La Rocca , *"Le mie parole, e tu?"* (details), 1971-72.

In *"Le mie parole, e tu?"*, the photographed hands have lines drawn on them marking out their different parts and in each of the areas they delimit the word "you" is written. In this series, La Rocca explores interpersonal relations of a conflicted and enigmatic character and she does so by staging the representation of gender, in particular, as being shot through with ambiguities. Not the least of these is the form of address adopted by the writing on the hands, which can be interpreted in different ways; as being addressed directly to a plurality of singular others or a plural, but singularised group of others, this is compounded by the fact that on the photographs the word is written in English, in contrast to the gender specific Italian of the title.[29]

La Rocca employs the image of hands touching each other in a way that establishes a linkage to a key example that Merleau-Ponty uses to illustrate the holistic character of embodied perception. Whether or not La Rocca had Merleau-Ponty's many different uses of this example in mind explicitly, the parallels are too many, direct and interesting to ignore.

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[29] The somewhat ambiguous *Dal momento in cui qualsiasi procedimento presuppone*, translates roughly into English as "From the moment in time when anything else proceeds" and *"Le mie parole, e tu?"* is more easily rendered as "My words, and you" though, as remarked, this translation might also, negatively, make emphatic the gendered character of the original as is visible in its written form.

Merleau-Ponty explains the character of an anonymous, pre-objective mode of intentionality discernible in the body's operative and intentional engagements in the world with an image of one's own hands touching each other and feeling this touch reciprocally. In his late essay, "The Philosopher and His Shadow", he describes it thus:

> There is a relation of my body to itself that makes it the *vinculum* of the self and things. When my right hand touches my left, I am aware of it as a "physical thing". But at the same moment, if I wish, an extraordinary event takes place: here is my left hand as well starting to perceive my right, *es wird Leib, es empfindet*. The physical thing becomes animate. Or, more precisely, it remains what it was [...] but an exploratory power comes to rest upon or dwell within it. Thus I touch myself touching; my body accomplishes "a sort of reflection". In it, through it, there is not just the unidirectional relationship of the one who perceives to what he perceives. The relationship is reversed, the touched hand becomes the touching hand, and I am obliged to say that the sense of touch here is diffused into the body—that the body is a "perceiving thing", a "subject-object". [30]

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[30] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Philosopher and His Shadow", p. 166. A comment in the manuscript for the *Visible and the Invisible*, makes it clear that his account of vision reveals it to be a variant of touch and that the forms of immanence and transcendence that structure all perceptual experience are fundamentally reflective *and* pre-objective (i.e., they produce meaning/have a direction (both *sens*) before and as a condition of being able to be taken up into cognitive acts that attribute objective characteristics to the things they reveal), thus: "every reflection is of the model of that of the hand touching by the hand touched" (p. 204). See M. C. Dillon's extended discussion of the development of (and the changes to) the thesis of reversibility and the image of hands touching that illustrates it throughout Merleau-Ponty's *oeuvre* in his, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, pp. 153-76. The "reversibility" of such pre-objective modes of bodily reflection is taken by Merleau-Ponty to characterise not only vision and perception in general, but also intersubjective relations and language and it is of central import for his ontological and epistemological claims regarding embodied perception. Dillon describes the significance of this thesis of perceptual reversibility in the following manner:

> The roles of touching and being touched are *prima facie* reversible because, after all, they are roles played by a unitary sensor, my own body. Yet, this underlying unity does not produce an absolute identity: the touching hand does not coincide with the touched hand; there is already a de-centring, 'a sort of dehiscence [that] opens my body in two' (*Visible and Invisible*, p. 123). This fission or non-coincidence is essential to perception: to perceive the thing, in this case my own hand, there must be a distancing of it. Perceiving something is different from being that thing (that is, coinciding with it): even in the case of touching my own body there is difference/distance/alienation within the identity/unity.
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> The ontological significance of this identity-within-difference needs to be stressed. Coincidence in self-perception is one of the grounds for the traditional isolation of the epistemological subject: it provides the basis for the thesis of incorrigibility of first person experience and transparency in the sphere of immanence which lead to the radical bifurcation of interiority and exteriority or consciousness and thing/Object/world. Similarly, absolute disjunction of perceiving and being perceived also produces a discontinuity between being-a-subject and being-an-object. The only way to evade the trap of the polarizations of dualism is to take up the standpoint, adopted by Merleau-Ponty, of a fundamentally ambiguous identity-encompassing-difference. It is this ambiguity that Merleau-Ponty articulates in the thesis of reversibility.

Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, p. 159. As Dillon notes, Merleau-Ponty's account of this ambiguous form of connectivity is articulated in critical rejection of Sartre's explicit separation of the moments of touching and being touched as they function to support his radical distinction between the significance of "my body for-me" and "the body for-others" in *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956, p. 455. In this context, the fact that the term *vinculum* Merleau-Ponty uses in the passage quoted above has both anatomic and mathematical senses is worth bearing in mind as it goes some way to characterising the 'positive' and 'critical' meanings Merleau-Ponty attributes to his notion of reversibility in distinction to Sartre's. As a noun it signifies that which unites or binds: a bond, knot, ligament, ligature, link, nexus, tie or yoke. The Latin noun *vinculum* refers to a small cord for binding the hands or feet; the verb *vincire* means "to bind". In mathematics it refers to a horizontal line placed above multiple quantities to indicate that they form a unit. Some of its common uses are to indicate repeating decimals, complex conjugations and the negation of a logical expression. In anatomy it refers to a tendinous connecting band or ligament that limits, and in doing so facilitates, the characteristic movements of an organ or body part.

The body as a "vinculum between self and things" is pre-thetic (unposited or unthematised in a cognitive sense) a corporeal linkage. It is a literally *unthought* yet *significant* binding of perceptions together with what they encounter in a manner that serves to establish the unity or consistency of the meaning of such encounters, but only insofar as this unity is ambiguous in its non-coincidence with itself or the object of perception. Renaud Barbaras usefully summarises the general significance of this thesis: "Because the body is a sentient thing rather than a pure object, it is not a pure subject any longer but rather incarnate sensibility". This characterisation of the body abides throughout Merleau-Ponty's philosophy though its meaning does modulate quite extensively. In his earlier writings it thematises a notion of perception derived from critical rejection of empiricist and idealist notions of consciousness and oriented to making sense of the existential situations that characterise historical forms of subjectivity. In his later writings, perception is replaced as a central category by an account of expression as the incarnate relationality of the visible as such. The latter view is also usefully described by Barbaras: "Incarnation, which grounds the identity of vision and the world, means as well the identity of the world with flesh. Just as there is no vision that would not be recaptured, encompassed within what it claims to cover

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Perhaps it is not going too far to note that, in a pop cultural register consistent with these usages but extending them into the realms of science fiction, the wonders of the internet reveal vinculum to be a term that also has a degree of ambiguously cathected libinal value, thus throwing up questions regarding the forms of spectacularised distance-connection this medium encourages. I refer to the large number of internet discussions of the *Star Trek Voyager* character "Seven of Nine" (played by Jeri Ryan) and the fascination many seem to have with her fictional status as belonging to a species characterised by a hive-like form of intelligence, narratively thematised in the programme by her use of a device called "the vinculum". (See http://daviddarling.info/encyclopedia/V/vinculum.html, for instance, as well as the quite extensive amount of amateur erotic fiction that centres on this character and is to be found on a range of websites serving audiences of widely differing sexual orientation.)

over, there is no part of the world which would not be already inhabited, haunted by a vision".[31]

Merleau-Ponty extends the notion of reversibility to characterise the perceptual bases of intersubjective, social relations.

> My right hand was present at the advent of my left hand's active sense of touch. It is in no different fashion that the other's body becomes animate before me when I shake another man's hand or just look at him. [...] The reason why I have evidence of the other man's being-there when I shake his hand is that his hand is substituted for my left hand, and my body annexes the body of another person in that "sort of reflection" it is paradoxically the seat of. My two hands "co-exist" or are "compresent" because they are one single body's hands. The other person appears through an extension of that compresence; he and I are like organs of one single incorporeality.[32]

Whilst the specific example of shaking hands might not seem sufficiently concrete or detailed to carry the weight of ethical relation Merleau-Ponty seems to think it does (He stresses this lack of differentiation in his later work to indicate that all bodies belong the same elemental and incarnate world), the fact that this notion of intersubjective perceptual compresence/dehiscence is set within a theory of the body underlying all such experiences makes it compelling in many other respects, as when he writes: "I borrow myself from others; I create others from my own thoughts. This is no failure to perceive others; it is the perception of others".[33] In the context of La Rocca 's works, the 'economies' of such relations come to the fore and they do so in photographic terms and as a challenge to the privileging of the masculine body as the presumed fundamental form of embodied relations. This claim rests on the distinction introduced in Merleau-Ponty's later works regarding what Barbaras glosses as the world encompassing character of the visible. Though it seems frighteningly naïve to assert the fact, one's

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[31] Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon: Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, p. 154 & pp. 157-8, respectively.
[32] Merleau-Ponty, "The Philosopher and His Shadow", p. 168.
[33] Ibid., p. 159.

vision, in this context, as it literally reaches out to palpate (touch) things in the elemental fleshiness of the visible would obviously also include photographs.[34]

Merleau-Ponty does, very briefly and quite obliquely, discuss seeing a photograph of one's hand in relation to the felt experience of kinaesthetic embodiment in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and, despite the brevity of his reference it is significant. He makes the point that such photographs fail, constitutively, to represent something essential to perceptual experience, precisely because they abstract from the durational character of embodied perception. The photograph of a hand is defined by its being bereft of the body's active and exploratory power in relation to things. His comment comes in a discussion of set of psychological experiments.

> It has been possible to show that we do not recognise our own hand in a photograph, and that many subjects are even uncertain about identifying their own handwriting among others, and yet that everyone recognises his own silhouette or his own walk when it is filmed. Thus we do not recognise the appearance of what we have often

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[34] One might think here of Luce Irigaray's Merleau-Pontian influenced emphasis on touch as the predominant modality of feminine embodiment and her critique of the specular logic of Western culture as a patriarchal construct. This is an assertion she arrives at through development of her now famous conception of feminine sexuality as "This sex which is not one", the title of an article in which she outlines, in explicit opposition to conceptualisations of feminine sexuality as being structured by a lack, or as being organised around a literal hole and subject to the lack of a penis. Thus, in this article she writes: "A woman 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being able to forbid her to do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, within herself she is already two—but not divisible into ones—who stimulate each other", *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977), trans. Catherine Porter, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 24. In this case, what of the visual promiscuity between the relative shifts in gender identity in the representations of the hands in La Rocca's works and the relations between forms of mediation of a whole series of reversible touching encounters as these are depicted over sequences of photographs and drawings that approach this task through different relations of proximity and distance? Perhaps, one might say that these works thematise the spectacularised situation in which just such a conventionally muted feminine body finds itself? But what then of the characterisation of vision as an identity of flesh and world and the notion of vision palpating its objects? Could one think in this case of the photographic distancing employed as mediating such relations of touch and vision? (Distance relations, the sphere of gazes and the implication of vision as a form of possession are all rejected by Irigaray as being grounded in the masculine body as the core figure for thinking embodiment as such). Perhaps one could consider, in this context, what Roland Barthes says of the photographic image and the characterisation of its epoch making historical novelty as an impersonal, mechanical and yet affectively "piercing" modality of experience of images—that it is, "neither image nor reality, a new being, really: a reality one can no longer touch", (Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 87). See also Irigaray's interview with *Ideology and Consciousness*, vol. 1, 1977. Toril Moy gives a measured description of some key aspects of Irigaray's thought and critical responses to it in, *Sexual / Textual Politics – Feminist Literary Theory*, London: Methuen, 1985, pp. 127-49. In contrast, Margaret Whitford defends Irigaray from her feminist critics in a number of contexts, for instance, "Rereading Irigaray" in, *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 106-25, in which she gives details of a range of criticisms to which Irigaray's notion of female biology (or as she insists, somewhat obscurely, morphology) has been subjected.

seen, and on the other hand we immediately recognise the visual representation of what is invisible to us in our own body.[35]

The concatenation of photograph and handwriting as more or less arbitrary forms of indexical relation to one's own hand present problems of recognition that are resolved in his description of the film of one's moving silhouette or walk. But on the basis of his later account of the visible, one would not need to follow the conclusions he draws. The whole body's kinaesthetic style of comportment remains invisible normally, but in the demand for recognition that frames his comment it is this fact that makes sense of the range of apparently realistic, or indexical signs of the body. The form of photographic misrecognition, (viewed in the *Phenomenology of Perception* in terms of that style of movement proper to one's sense of embodiment) if interpreted through the later emphasis on the visible as such, would have to be included as a moment of the flesh of the world, of language and of perception. In this instance, reversibility as the reflective structure of perception, though based in the proximity and dehiscence of touching-being-touched is explicitly touch in relation to the dimensionality of the environment in which bodies find themselves and vision is thus conceived as something like the touch of the world one's vision touches.

In his brief aside on a set of scientific experiments, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges photographic indexicality as central to the forms of its use as a realistic medium, but denies that the assumption of a direct or empirical connection implied by the concept of indexicality is really meaningful with respect to the perceptual conditions of self-recognition.[36] Photography (and handwriting, perhaps) interrupts the anonymous circuit

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[35] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 149.

[36] To dwell on this illustration for a moment, one can note the way in which the still photograph and handwriting are played off against the moving image in a way that positions the former as lacking in comparison to film, vis-à-vis the task of recognition, despite the implication that they all share an arguably "indexical" relation to the body or body part that they serve to register and represent. Film is significant here because of the importance Merleau-Ponty grants to movement, and specifically to bodily

of the whole, kinaesthetic process of identity and difference that the reversibility thesis projects as being central to perceptual experience. Merleau-Ponty's reservations regarding the medium notwithstanding, this is the problem of recognition that can be read as informing La Rocca's use of photographs, text and drawings. La Rocca combines these to thematise the relations discernible in Merleau-Ponty's problematisation of recognition and the existential connection assumed to characterise indexical representation.

In different ways, Bochner and La Rocca respond to notions of embodiment, perception and their problematic relation to photography in terms of Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied perception. This observation would remain banal, however, were it merely taken to demonstrate that artists have in different ways taken up Merleau-Pontian ideas in their work. Discussing these works together allows a further critical distinction to be made regarding the relative degree of reflexivity with which the representational conditions of photography (and through these, the themes of perception, embodiment and spatiality) are dealt with as a concern for art.

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movement, for any kind of sense of "self". One's mode of bodily movement is, as a whole, invisible whilst also being immediate and familiar. Its mediation in an indexical representation is recognised "immediately, presumably because it is the specific mode of movement that is indexed. Without wanting to labour the point and over-interpret this elliptical reference, one can say that it indicates an attenuated acceptance of the indexical character of certain representational techniques of vision, but in a manner that seeks to derive the ontological basis of their significance from something other than this indexical character. Film is positioned here as a medium that promotes immediate self-recognition for the subject of the experiment when the body is seen as a whole and not as a fragment or as the constitutively distanced trace of one part of the body (the hand that has written). The contrast places stress upon the fragmentary character of the photograph, the way it chops the world into pieces whilst representing it, and how this characterises its stillness. The role of the connection assumed between the photograph and its "referent" in characterising this kind of image as a form of realism remains operative, but is not particularly truthful in respect of the ways in which the body operates in the production of meaning. Photographs, here, do not say much that is meaningful in respect of what it is to be in the world as an embodied subject. The exact register of appearances offered as a possibility by photographic means is the wrong kind of abstraction to tell us much about the paradoxical fact of both *having* and *being* a body, so to speak. When it comes to recognising oneself when mediated by technical means, "the visual representation of what is invisible to us in our own body" is most effective and so "primordial" in relation to that which we have "often seen". It is worth stressing that the film in question is one that, though it is rich in terms of movement, would also seem to be oddly flat, presenting as it does a moving silhouette and not a rather more conventionally "cinematic" representation a body or body part, "in the round".

La Rocca 's use of photography dramatises the ambiguities of perceptual recognition. It remains limited with regard to questions of the reflexivity with which it functions as a documentary vehicle for the content intended, but her focus is elsewhere, on the relations between media as more or less effective forms of index and how these might formally stand together to indicate the ambiguities of gendered embodiment and its misrecognitions. In contrast, Bochner's photographic works seek to problematise issues of embodiment and perceptual acts as they are transformed by photographic forms and techniques. He does so, precisely, by evacuating any 'atmosphere' of emotive content from the works' concern for embodied experience and this functions through the concentration on the specificities of different photographic forms, which are characterised, ultimately, as subject to misunderstandings.

These are artworks that take up Merleau-Pontian themes and the way they do so is contrary to his explicit notion of art practice, but also congruent with his general account of embodied experience. But the point to be made is that Problems of the phenomenological aspects of photography are not exhausted by art historical consideration of their relations to other practices, nor are they explicable entirely in the perceptual terms of a direct phenomenological analysis.

Taken together, these works give the clue to a continuation of critical analysis of photography in Merleau-Pontian terms that would extend the cultural role of his theory out of the conventional, analogical circuit between art object and viewer and into a phenomenology of embodied perception as mediated by social forms such as photography. To anticipate what follows one can say that, these characterisations of photographic art works that question aesthetic, social and historical registers of perception and embodiment are articulable according to the Merleau-Pontian notion of an interminably instituted phenomenological reduction. In this sense, the question asked

by Rolfe Sachsse, "To what extent is the image itself already flesh?", that stands as an epigram to this chapter frames the following discussion.[37] Before the implications of this question can be addressed it is necessary, however, to take more detailed account of Merleau-Ponty's explicit attitude towards photography.

Merleau-Ponty "on" Photography

Merleau-Ponty hardly wrote anything about photography. His explicit comments on the subject are few in number and resolutely negative. As noted above, he makes occasional, passing remarks to it in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and it is briefly referred to in a critical manner in each of his three essays on art. Almost without exception, when he does refer to photography it is as an example of whatever object, attitude, theory or practice that happens to be under critique at the time, or it is strategically opposed to whatever position or descriptive point he is attempting to articulate. In light of this, any attempt to derive a theory of photography from his writings would seem compelled first of all to offer an answer to the question: Why is Merleau-Ponty so negative about photography?

Nevertheless, though it is clear that he does not offer anything like a sustained or positive account of it, analysis of Merleau-Ponty "on" photography offers more than a perfunctory way of clarifying how this philosophy might constructively inform critical

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[37] The original German text of this quotation reads: "Wie weit ist das Bild selbst schon Fleisch" and comes from Rolf Sachsse's, "Geist, Körper, Fotographie—und die Moral", in *Gegen die Indifferenz der Fotographie: Die Bielefelder Symposien über Fotographie 1979-1985, Beiträge zur ästhetischen Theorie und Praxis der Fotographie Fachhochschule Bielefeld*, eds. Gottfried Jäger, Jörg Boström, Karl-Martin Holzhäuser, Bielefeld: Editions Mazona, 1986, p. 133. "Spirit, Body, Photography—and the Moral" was an address given to the fourth Beilefeld Symposium on Photography (held on 19 and 20 November, 1982) in response to Heinz Buddemeier's discussion of his, then, newly published book, *Das Foto: Geschichte und Theorie der Fotographie als Grundlage eines neuen Urteils (The Photo: History and Theory of Photography as the Foundation of a New Judgement)*, Hamburg: Reinbeck, 1981.

discourse on the subject. Indeed, I argue that this apparently tangential approach to his writings actually promises a distinctive way of conceptualising certain central ambiguities in his philosophy. I would go so far as to claim that examination of what Merleau-Ponty writes about photography promises a distinctive way of addressing more general problems regarding what his philosophy takes as a central concern, yet does not appear willing or, perhaps, able to address in explicit terms; namely, the analysis of concrete "social spaces of historical existence" in the terms set by his existential-phenomenology of embodied perception.[38] The argument presented in what follows is premised on the idea that an important clue to such analyses is to be found in the consistency with which Merleau-Ponty negates photography, his reasons for and manner of doing so, and what the significance of these are for his more general theorisation of perception. The conceptual register of these issues is to be found in his distinctive conception of art and the problems and indeterminacies introduced by consideration of the way his notion of actual art practices has been overtaken and transformed historically.

The clearest indications of what Merleau-Ponty thinks about photography appear in his three essays on art. The first of these, *Cézanne's Doubt*, was written and published at around the same time as *The Phenomenology of Perception* and shares this book's concern to analyse conventional forms and theories of visual practice through a radicalised concept of perception that provides a critical framework for the dissolution of subject-object positions conventionally taken to structure consciousness. The second, *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*, (written some ten years later) was

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[38] Peter Osborne's book, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, London and New York: Verso, 1995, (an attempt to develop, "a post-Hegelian philosophy of historical time in the form of a critical hermeneutics of historical existence", p. 114) offers an extended account of different attempts to understand modernity philosophically. The argument presented here is indebted to his comments regarding the theoretically underdeveloped notion of existential spatiality in this context (see especially, f.n. 49, p. 225 from which the quotation here is taken).

produced in a period when Merleau-Ponty began to reconsider the grounds and focus of this phenomenology of perception, developing a range of new concepts and reflective procedures with a focus on language in order to facilitate a categorial reorientation of his previous inquiry. Just before his death he produced a third essay, *Eye and Mind*, in which the issues raised by his earlier existential phenomenology of perception and its later critical problematisation are displaced onto the terrain of a fundamental ontology of the visible as is also, famously, exemplified in his unfinished treatise the *Visible and the Invisible*. Though these essays are marked in many significant respects by deep transformations in his philosophical project they do, nevertheless, share a basically consistent relation to photography, which is positioned strategically throughout as exemplifying technological forms of reification. The question is, whether this relation to photography is at all significant?

At first glance, when one considers the bulk of Merleau-Ponty writings and when one looks to what others have made of them, the answer to this question would seem, quite simply, to be no. Understandably, photography has been taken to be peripheral to the main concerns of his philosophy, especially when one takes these to exemplify the broad thematic concerns structuring the rest of his writings, in which case photography as a specific form appears epiphenomenal if not irrelevant. In order to assess the significance of my insistence on its centrality, then, it is necessary to articulate an argument for its importance in his aesthetics, to assess the significance of this for his account of art and to evaluate what this might mean for his philosophy more generally. In "Cézanne's Doubt" Merleau-Ponty writes:

> Cézanne did not think he had to choose between feeling and thought, as if he were deciding between chaos and order. He did not want to separate the stable things which we see and the shifting way in which they appear; he wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization. [...] Cézanne wanted to paint this primordial world, and his pictures therefore seem to show nature pure, while photographs of

> the same landscapes suggest man's works, conveniences, and imminent presence. [...] He wished, as he said, to confront the sciences with the nature "from which they came".[39]

These extracts provide one with a synopsis of the salient points of Merleau-Ponty's theory of painting and they give the clue to the centrality of Cézanne within it. That the negation of photography is integral here is of great importance.

Famously, "Cézanne's Doubt" makes much of the painter's fortitude, eccentricity and illness, though in a way which attempts to foreclose on the psycho-biographical interpretation of his works that had, as Merleau-Ponty remarks, been conventional in the period leading up to the time his writing.[40] Much of what Merleau-Ponty makes of Cézanne's pictures derives from the artist's obdurate insistence on attempting to paint in a way that honestly registered the problems and processes of looking and mark making. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty's insistence on how the painter's life came to be shaped by this project encourages him to claim Cézanne as a kind of proto-phenomenologist. In Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty finds a figure who, outside of formal philosophy, attempts to interrogate his world in a philosophical manner.[41] Despite its phenomenological

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[39] Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", pp. 63-4.

[40] See Merleau-Ponty's comment: "What we call his work was, for him, only an attempt, an approach to painting [...] Painting was his world and his mode of existence [...] and still he had moments of doubt about this vocation" (p. 59). These doubts concern the way Cézanne's work was ignored, unsuccessful during his lifetime, challenged by the dismissive comments of contemporaries and worries about his physical and mental health. Nevertheless: "It is nonetheless possible that Cézanne conceived a new form of art which, while occasioned by his nervous condition, is valid for everyone. Left to himself, he was able to look at nature as only a human being can. The meaning of his work cannot be determined from his life" (p. 61). The meaning of his work is not, thus, determinable art historically (in Merleau-Ponty's limited notion of what this means). Nonetheless, explicitly and very definitely, after saying that history of different kinds won't help understand the meaning of this oeuvre, Merleau-Ponty, places it back into a historical context. The critical stress on certain kinds of historical practice is actually revealed to be necessary in order to understand the work as a project. Its status and meaning as an existential project are not without context, they are specifically *modern*.

[41] Merleau-Ponty's first essay on art was published in the aftermath of World War II and had its initial impact in the context of the massive intellectual and popular reception of existentialism, alongside the writings of Sartre and de Beauvoir. It should be seen, at least in part, as a contribution to widespread responses to these writers' sense of a moribund, overly traditional intellectual climate that marked their experience of intellectual culture in the pre-war period. Specifically, "Cézanne's Doubt" also stands as an intervention into the problems and possibilities presented by the traumatic moment of post-war social reality. Writing in this period about Cézanne was already to adopt a retrospective view of culture, looking back over the historical gulf introduced by the experience of the war in France to refigure attitudes to what were already canonical works in order to draw out an account of expression in the face of

emphasis, it should be noted that this theory of art experience is conceived of as being specifically historical and the mode of Merleau-Ponty's assertion of its historicity is explicitly dialectical (Cézanne's exemplary expression of the 'humanity' of existence is a reaction to modernity, which is the situation out of which Cézanne's art emerges as a project and to which it speaks as a problem). For instance, Merleau-Ponty's account of Cézanne situates the artist's achievements by emphasising and qualifying his relationship to Impressionist painting and to contemporaneous science, as well as by stressing the institutional mediation of the classical tradition of painting by museums and the conventions of education and viewing they support. The account of Cézanne's exemplary existential doubt is buttressed by a series of engagements with historical and traditional conventions of artistic practice at a time where art institutions were

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dissolution and of universal human creativity in the immediate memory of its tendency to destruction. In this climate, Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the paintings of Cézanne have to be understood as standing simultaneously as a historically situated address to contemporaneous problems of cultural and political agency *and* as a claim on aesthetics and art practice oriented by his distaste for the forms of avant-gardism that marked French culture in the periods before, during and after the war (notably, one can think here of Cubism and Dada but, most especially, his dislike for Surrealism).

For an interesting attempt to historically contextualise Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne whilst extending Merleau-Ponty's analyses into discussion of other media, see Brendan Prendeville, "Merleau-Ponty, Realism and Painting: Psychophysical Space and the Space of Exchange", in *Art History*, volume 22, no. 3, pp. 364-388. More general accounts of the intellectual climate of pre- and post-World War II French culture are given in: Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980; Joseph Chiari, *Twentieth-Century French Thought: From Bergson to Levi-Strauss*, London: Elek Books, 1975; Eric Matthews, *Twentieth Century French Philosophy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. From the point of view of the tumultuous political events in French intellectual culture between 1945 and the early 1960s, perhaps the most informative study is Mark Poster, *Existential Marxism in Postwar France: From Sartre to Althusser*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1975. A biographical account of Merleau-Ponty's engagement in cultural debates that places his writings on art (somewhat sketchily) in relation to his academic career is given by Gerhard Danzer in, *Merleau-Ponty: Ein Philosoph auf der Suche Nach Sinn*, Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2003. Also see the wide ranging account of Merleau-Ponty's philosophical development offered by Albert Rabil, *Merleau-Ponty: Existentialist of the Social World*, New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1967. Perhaps the most reliable introduction to the character and development of Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics that benefits from recent scholarly work on the topic is to be found in, G. A. Johnson & M. Smith (eds.), *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993, pp. 3-58. The cultural impact of existential philosophy in France is examined in Frances Morris's "Introduction" and Sarah Wilson's commentary, "Paris Post-War: In Search of the Absolute" in the exhibition catalogue, *Paris Post War: Art & Existentialism 1945-55*, Frances Morris (ed.), London: Tate Gallery, 1993, pp. 15-24 & 25-52 respectively. Merleau-Ponty provides his own, trenchant account of relationships between culture, philosophy and politics in France between the end of the Second World War and 1960 in his introduction to *Signes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1960, (translated as *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964, pp. 3-38).

undergoing radical changes in relation to historical transformations in knowledge more generally.[42] On this view, Cézanne's work responds to a perceived crisis in the relation between the sciences and the lived experience of those subjected to the world they shape as well as offering a counter to the forms of avant-gardism that Merleau-Ponty displayed an aversion for throughout his career.[43] Photography is exemplary of these situations for a number of reasons. It is an intrinsically historical, technological form that makes sense of the 'confrontation' between nature and culture proposed and it is taken by Merleau-Ponty to exemplify a tendency to treat the world as an agglomeration of discreet, fixed and given facts. In this context, Cézanne performs something like the phenomenological suspension of the "natural attitudes" according to which the phenomenological tradition thinks subjective experience is normatively structured and the image of this in art for Merleau-Ponty is photographic.[44] It is important to note in this context that, as an exemplary technical form, photography, is thought to naturalise the historically contingent forms of culture. Indeed, though he does not make it explicit, Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of photography imply that he views it as a contingent technological form that positions nature as being an invariant and entirely external fact.

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[42] For a wide ranging and general account of the transformations wrought on cultural conceptions of spatio-temporality by scientific, technological, political and social developments in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries see, Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space 1880-1918*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983.

[43] For instance, see the following comment, obviously aimed at Surrealist experiments with forms of automatic writing.

> There is the improvisation of child prodigies who have not learned their own gesture and who believe, under the pretext that a painter is no more than a hand, that it suffices to have a hand in order to paint. They extract petty wonders from their body as a morose young man who observes his body with sufficient complacency can always find some peculiarity in it to nourish his private religion. But there is also the improvisation of the artist who has turned toward the world that he wants to express and (each world calling for another) has finally composed for himself an acquired voice which is more than the cry which gave birth to his search for expression. There is the improvisation of automatic writing and there is that of the *Charterhouse of Parma*.

Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Voices" p. 51-2.

[44] The critique of the natural attitude is central to Husserl's philosophy. Human beings generally and habitually live in the state this concept describes. It indicates that experience is conventionally conceived in normative practices and reflection as a fractured situation in which, as a subject of experience one finds continuously present objects standing over against one. This inculcates a fundamental division that encourages a view of experience as an encounter with established and given facts that are always already unchanging and autonomous.

Contrary to many critical interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, one might assert here that his apparently naive notion of perception (with its emphasis on the plenitude of perceptual experience and the assertion of forms of phenomenological presence) actually positions nature as an abiding and constant yet intrinsically contingent condition of perceptual experience that is only ever perceptually encountered as always already encultured.

The key point for Merleau-Ponty is that Cézanne 'discovers' a way of practically articulating the Gestalt psychological concept of "lived perspective". His aesthetic theory attempts to articulate the manner in which this promotes a perceptual suspension of habitually reified experience and to imply a community of perceptual beings in a way that is explicitly un-photographic.

> By remaining faithful to the phenomena in his investigations of perspective, Cézanne discovered what recent psychologists have come to formulate: the lived perspective, that which we actually perceive, is not a geometric or photographic one. The objects we see close at hand appear smaller, those far away seem larger than they do in a photograph. [...] To say that a circle seen obliquely is seen as an ellipse is to substitute for our actual perception what we would see if we were cameras: in reality we see a form which oscillates around the ellipse without being an ellipse.[45]

This expression of the ambiguity of perception is not a claim on 'timeless' and 'pre-linguistic' aesthetic value. Rather, perception in this context is a matrixical relation between conceptual or intellectual and sensory aspects of the aesthetic mediation of engagements in the world. Art, aesthetic experience and perception are all intrinsically characterised by relations between the conceptual and the sensible. In this manner Merleau-Ponty posits an aesthetic of embodied community defined according to such authentic modes of perception and does so through a set of explicitly dialectical oppositions to technical image forms, predominantly photography and film, but also to a certain extent, crucially, the ideas of the landscape and of painting.

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[45] Merleau-Ponty, "Cézanne's Doubt", p. 64.

The value of modern art, for Merleau-Ponty, is that its manner of challenging classical traditions of representation offers one the possibility of a perceptually reflective experience of the world, as one might experience it, but habitually does not. In opposition to this condition and as a mode of its suspension, he gives an account of artworks as mediating the perceptual "unfolding" of the kind of temporally rich experience obscured in normative modes of social experience. This critical-perceptual suspension has socio-historical as well as individual registers.

To what does Merleau-Ponty refer when he does mention photography? Generally, his references concern "the photograph"; more often than not meaning the small-scale print considered in terms of its conventional treatment as a form of realistic representation. Sometimes he mentions the use of photographs in scientific experiments, but treats these obliquely as part of the conventionalisation of evidentiary media defined and delimited by one or other form of experimental procedure. (Effectively, these uses of photographs also define the medium in terms of the relatively small photographic print.) Inasmuch as Merleau-Ponty does offer a critique of photography, it is because he sees it as exemplary of a pervasive and problematic kind of "objectivist" realism that is connected to the print form. In the context of a philosophy that "consists in re-learning to look at the world" photography is projected as a prime symptom of a pervasive technique of looking that implies acceptance of a world that comprises in discreet sets of given facts that pre-exist one's experience and that are not altered by one's encounter with them.[46]

In this Merleau-Ponty echoes a quite conventional attitude adopted towards photography in the phenomenological tradition. One can note a connection to Heidegger's celebrated criticism of technological modernity in the "Age of the World

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[46] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. xx.

Picture" and the idea of the modern transformation of the whole world into a reductive representationalism. Heidegger's criticism of the fact that the modern world is habitually seen as a kind of exhibition and his argument against the centralisation of vision through the technical reduction of Being to the model of a picture, or, "truth transformed into the certainly of representation").[47]

But, perhaps, another example that appears closer to Merleau-Ponty is to be found in Michel Dufrêne's comments on the use of photography, which restricts its relation to art to the secondary practice of reproducing paintings and sculptures. Thus, in his *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* Dufrêne writes:

> All these reproductions make us see and not think. But the sensuous which they set before us is doubly impoverished, both qualitatively and spatially, so that we can no longer lead the sort of ritual dance around it through which, in multiplying our perspectives, we physically experience the inexhaustible nature of the object—a nature which is, in the case of the aesthetic object, the symbol of a spiritual depth of which we always have a presentation. The art of reproduction consists, then, in concretising, from among these innumerable angles of vision, the one which is the most significant or evocative, thus teaching us to see while providing us with the occasion for seeing. The ingenuity which reproduction displays in "artistically" using the mechanical means at its command makes up for the impotence of these means. In the absence of the plenitude of the sensuous, the reproduction conveys instead its character, which is both surprising and complete—e.g., in the absence of tonal quality there is melody. This is why the photographer can be called an artist with as much right as an actor. He does not create a new aesthetic object but, in placing himself in the service of the object which he is reproducing, he exists on its level. [...] In most of the major arts—especially painting and architecture [...] the fate of the reproduction, given the present level of technique, recalls that of mnemonic reproduction. Memory gives us more than a knowledge of the past but never gives us its living actuality. Memory oscillates between reconstruction and actualisation. Pure memory, the dream which would be knowledge, is lost in the nothingness of the unconscious. The presence of the painting in the photograph of it [...] is a bloodless presence.[48]

Though Merleau-Ponty and Dufrêne's views of art differ in important respects one can say on the basis of these comments that they share in the judgement that photographs are "bloodless" when compared to the relative perceptual roundedness and fullness of other aesthetic objects. The important point here is that this relation, for Merleau-Ponty, is relative (i.e., it is historically contingent). There is a tension that

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[47] Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture", in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, New York: Harper Row, 1977, p. 127.

[48] Michel Dufrêne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973, pp. 43-4. Further to the point of photography's 'naturalism' and contrary to the gist of Dufrêne's point, one might say that Merleau-Ponty's criticism could be further articulated through an extension of Dufrêne's first claim here. Photographic reproductions enforce a mode of seeing that is conceptually determined to obscure the fact of perception's intrinsically reflective character.

undoubtedly shapes Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics and it is one that reaches explicit expression in his late critique of "operational thinking" in the essay "Eye and Mind".

Merleau-Ponty's comments on film problematise any easy assumption that his attitude to photography is shaped by a reactionary rejection of technology. They also serve to articulate, in a cultural context, the importance of his extension of the notion of perceptual gestalt. He writes of film that its manner of unfolding a narrative over time is experienced as a kind of "melodic unity" unfolding meaning as a *temporal gestalt*.[49]

> The meaning of a film is incorporated into its rhythm just as the meaning of a gesture may immediately be read in that gesture: the film does not mean anything but itself. The idea is presented in a nascent state and emerges from the temporal structure of the film as it does from the coexistence of the parts of a painting. The joy of art lies in its showing how something takes on meaning – not by referring to already established and acquired ideas but by the temporal or spatial arrangement of elements. [...] They [movies] directly present to us that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people, which we can see in the sign language of gesture and gaze and which clearly defines each person we know.[50]

The notion of gestalt (shape, form or configuration) is, famously, a development from the insights of Gestalt Psychology's theorisation of perception. Gestalt is a term to describe the form of organisation of perception at a level between theories that posit sensory experience as made up of atom-like units of data and as opposing theorisations of the overarching rational structure of the mind. In between these Gestalt psychology posits figure-ground relations between perceived objects and their environments as being basic to perception and thus of humanity. Merleau-Ponty takes this notion to be suggestive of an ontological framework for phenomenological inquiry. It is a key term that he uses in a range of contexts and to which he gives a wide range of different senses.

Film, for Merleau-Ponty, is related to the novel (insofar as it is narrative in character). It is also like painting (insofar as it is a visual form). By characterising film

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[49] Merleau-Ponty, "The Film and the New Psychology", in *Sense and Non Sense*, trans. Hubert Dreyfus and Patricia Dreyfus, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964, p. 54.
[50] Ibid., p. 57-8.

as a temporal gestalt, Merleau-Ponty is emphasising the manner in which films are conventionally structured wholes that unfold their stories (when they do so) over time by means of sequential organisation of action and episodic events, but also by means of the meaning of the movement of characters and things. Any part of such unfolding movement is structured by its relation to the whole, much in the manner of the development of a melodic theme in music, hence the claim that it is perceived as a gestalt. However, the temporalisation of the notion in this context entails extension of its sense and introduces a formal shift in the correlation between the figure (say, each particular moment of temporal unfolding in the film) and ground (which in this case becomes divorced from its conventional sense as perceptual background and shifts into the register of cultural form even though it maintains and attenuated sense of 'melodic unity').

By contrast, still photography, on Merleau-Ponty's view, is exhausted by its (useful, but ultimately restricted) role in pointing at the things it constitutes as distant, as in the following comment: "those exact photographic reproductions that retain all the essential features of the object and allow us to examine that object in its absence". It is no surprise, then, to find that painting is said to perform exactly the opposite perceptual function; "at no stage are we sent back to the natural object".[51] It is important to emphasise again that the apparent inhumanity or artificiality of photography when considered in Merleau-Ponty's terms posits a more 'naturalised' notion of nature in the perceptual experience of what is depicted than the constitutively encultured view of nature he attributes to paintings and sculptures 'from life'. Yet in another brief aside in the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty indicates that, had he devoted more attention to the subject, he would have been able to conceive of different senses of

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[51] Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 96-7.

photography as used in social situations: "It is true that I can be conscious of the same object variously oriented, and [...] I can even recognise an inverted face. But it is always provided that mentally we take up a position in front of it, and sometimes we do so physically, as when we tilt our head to look at a photograph held in front of him by a person at our side".[52]

"Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence", presents a critique of the arbitrary relations between works established by the museum as a generalising institution (a critique that has as its object Andre Malraux's photographically constituted, "imaginary museum" developed in *The Voices of Silence*).[53] Merleau-Ponty places this notion of the institution of art in the context of an appropriative account of Saussure's linguistic theory.[54] Malraux's idea that "reproduction and reproduction alone" reveals what one might call "meta-stylistic" tendencies—transcendent with relation to individual practices that are geographically and historically ambivalent and finding their specificity at the level of "super-artists of indistinct birth"—is dependant on technical modes of seeing such as photography. This fact, for Merleau-Ponty, finds a disturbing corollary in the socio-political implications sedimented in the levelling structure of the institution projected by Malraux.

> Malraux meditates upon miniatures and coins in which photographic enlargement miraculously reveals the same very same style that is found in full-sized works; or upon works uncovered beyond the limits of Europe, far from all "influences" –works in which moderns are astonished to find the same style which a conscious painter has reinvented somewhere else.[55]

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[52] Ibid., p. 253.
[53] André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence*, trans. Stuart Gilbert, London: Secker and Warburg, 1954.
[54] Merleau-Ponty, "Indirect Language". For a scholarly account of the writing and publication history of this essay that gives details of the differences between its versions and contextualises it historically, see Galen A. Johnson, "Structures and Painting: "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence", in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, pp. 14-34. For an opposition to the idea that Merleau-Ponty is a theorist of pre-linguistic visual experience, see Alex Potts, "Art Works, Utterances, and Things". Analysis of the broader aims of the research project from which this essay was excerpted is given in James Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, Houndmills, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1985, especially in the chapter "Speech, Expression and the Sense of History", pp. 102-154.
[55] Ibid., p. 101

The narrowly conceived Hegelianism of Malraux's theory of art (its apparently hypostatisation of the intelligibility of history as such) is held to critical account in this essay, not because it misrecognises the intelligibility of the historical *per se* (say, its amenability to abstract reconfiguration and the manner in which this privileges the present state of 'seeing' as supervening those encountered as being past). Rather, the insight that one can "trace an intelligible history of thought", Merleau-Ponty insists, threatens to hypostatise the conditions of experience in the historical present in which the interests of such inquiry are played out. The implication is that the realisation of history's systematic character is literally dangerous unless attempts to understand it are cognizant of the ambiguous character of the specificity of all historical presents as related to each other and seen through the prism of one of any number of historical conjunctures from one particular viewpoint. Merleau-Ponty's criticism turns on a broader critique of a particular form of Hegelianism that he sees as synonymous with forms of abstraction and the instrumentalisation of reason, which is not to say that he views Hegel's systematic and speculative philosophy is simply a tissue of unwarranted abstractions. Rather, it is the manner in which Hegelian philosophy is related to the particular historical present of modernity in question through a narrow interpretative framework that perversely indicates the extent to which instrumental forms of abstraction have come true. Malraux exemplifies a tendency to lose sight of the necessity that "in this synthesis each term remains the whole of the world at the date considered". In linking, as Hegel does, existing philosophies of history together in a speculative system of the development of consciousness as 'world spirit', one should at least remain alert to the need to maintain different instances in history; "in their place like so many open significations and let an exchange of anticipations and

metamorphoses subsist between them".[56] In response to this possibility, Merleau-Ponty gives an account of style as an essential human attribute that is nonetheless, specifically historical, thus:

> The whole marvel of a style already present in the invisible elements of a work thus comes down to the fact that, working in the human world of perceived things, the artist comes to put his stamp upon even the inhuman world revealed by optical instruments – just as the swimmer unknowingly skims over a whole buried universe which would frighten him if he looked at it with undersea goggles. [...] We must therefore recognize that what is designated by the terms *glance, hand*, and in general *body* is a system of systems destined for the inspection of a world and capable of leaping over distances, piercing the perceptual future, and outlining hollows and reliefs, distances and deviations – a meaning – in the inconceivable flatness of being.[57]

To follow the logic of this rather suggestive metaphor, as "swimmers" on the surface of such "inconceivable flatness", human beings share the condition of skimming its surfaces, but should not lose sight of the fluid and inhuman medium that both supports and envelopes their active immersion in it, as this condition also opens onto the possibility of the radically inhuman and the unknown that characterises the perceptual condition described. The 'inhuman' here is a register of both the artificial forms of mediation exemplified by photography and an inherent aspect of perceptual experience of the so-called 'natural' world.

Whilst the concepts style and expression do, undoubtedly, in Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics share the rather conservative sense given these terms in the art historical tradition, these senses by no means exhaust their meaning or relevance in the present context.[58] His interpretation of Saussure's differential model of linguistic signification

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[56] Ibid., p. 119.
[57] Ibid., pp. 102-4.
[58] One can note, in this context, Linda Singer's distinction between the traditional art historical and Merleau-Pontian notions of style as this pertains to the forms of 'distance' she takes to characterise the former and the desire for phenomenological 'proximity' she discerns in the latter. Thus:

> Merleau-Ponty's quarrel with much that passes as stylistic analysis is that its discourse somehow obscures the work and the processes which engendered it. Despite its intentions to the contrary, stylistic analysis often imposes a false mystery which moves the work farther away, rather than drawing it near. It has negated the painter's labours by encasing him in the cult of genius, and has transformed his efforts into magical emanations. It has transformed a living expression into a message from the dead which must be translated by a cultural intercessor.

Linda Singer, "Merleau-Ponty on the Concept of Style", in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, p. 235. In this light and against many of his more literal interpreters, it seems entirely arguable that, despite the insistent tenor of Merleau-Ponty's claims vis-à-vis Cézanne the person, his account of this painter really

places great emphasis on the moments at which signs are taken up and used in situations. This leads to an account of modes of experience that makes emphatic the style (the historically, socially, culturally and physically determined, but open and novel moment) of enunciation.

Style is an intrinsically historical term for the existential setting of cultural experience. Thus:

> Through the action of culture, I take up my dwelling in lives which are not mine. I confront them, I make one known to the other, I make them com possible in an order of truth. I make myself responsible for all of them, and I create a universal life, just as by the thick and living presence of my body, in one fell swoop I take up my dwelling in space. And like the functioning of the body, that of words or paintings remains obscure to me. The words, lines, and colours which express me come out of me as gestures. They are torn from me by what I want to say as my gestures are by what I want to do. In this sense, there is in all expression a spontaneity which will not take orders, not even those which I would like to give myself.[59]

As this passage makes clear, the relations in question are not necessarily comfortable or consolatory as is often assumed. The spontaneity indicated in the final sentence of this passage refers both to the forms of transcendence involved in relations to others *and*

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doesn't have that much to do with the man but rather the possibility of experiencing the body of work he produced that subsequent subjects might take a share in.

[59] Ibid., p. 112. See Jonathon Gilmore's discussion of these issues, "Between Philosophy and Art", in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau*-Ponty, eds, Taylor Carmen and Mark B. N. Hanson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 291. Gilmore points out Merleau-Ponty's thought of art is oriented by a fundamentally Hegelian insight into the relation between conception and execution. The cultural production of meaning, which it is the task of the concept of expression in Merleau-Ponty's writings to make sense of, is in no way simply personal. Expression and meaning are linked to the account Merleau-Ponty gives of embodied experience as a relation to specific others situated in a world that is historically shaped, as Gilmore puts it, "Merleau-Ponty conceives of meaning as generated not exclusively by the artist, but by the world in which the artist is situated". The artwork is specifically and unavoidably situated in a particular historical conjuncture. This "transitive" conception of art and the historicity of the artwork that Merleau-Ponty is subject to, and indeed demands, critical articulation in terms of its relation to the spatio-temporal conditions of experience of modernity. It is modernity that allows the realisation of this transitive character of art for Merleau-Ponty. This fact is more often than not acknowledged in Merleau-Pontian scholarship, given its exegetical fastidiousness. Style is the manner in which expression as the relational production of meaning happens. It indicates the fact that expression of meaning, although, a common aspect of all possible past, present and future art practises conceived according to the model of fundamentally human expressive activity, always also happens in manner that is situated in a specific historical time and place. Style is the socio-historical articulated of the making of sense. For Merleau-Ponty painters don't put 'themselves' into paintings. Rather, their style is the shape, or form, of a problematic, difficult to conceive and determining relation to the world (to nature) that is always already articulated as historically specific form of becoming. Thus:

> An individual at any given time in his or her life is not just determined by the events of the past. Rather, he proposes, not only is the future determined by the past, but the past, through imaginative projection is determined by the future. This is obviously not an understanding of determination in solely casual terms; it is a notion of *determination as interpretation*.

Ibid., pp. 308-9.

to the fact that the worldly situation of the subject so conceived has as its material context a pre-existing historical world.

By way of summary, one can note that Merleau-Ponty has basically three distinct yet intimately related criticisms of photography. Firstly, it is a persuasive but degraded form of realism, exemplary of what he calls "operational thinking" (Malraux's use of photography would be an example of this at the level of culture). Secondly, he thinks that photography derogates the possibility of conceiving and performing acts of expressive creativity. Thirdly, Photographs are the result of—and a means of furthering—a certain technical overdetermination of perception. What photographs present is taken to be intimately connected to the real (technically and conventionally), yet rendered inhuman by its passage through the array of optics, mechanical apparatus and processes of chemical transfer to end in forms of habitually naturalising usage. Photographs appear in his writings as the technical crystallisation of an attitude to vision, specifically, one that (reified in its generalised separation from the other senses and rendered static, flat and isolated by its theoretical articulation in technical terms) assumes the possibility of a "view from nowhere"; a technical form that appears to *realise* a "secularised", fragmentary and yet strangely "divine" omnipresence. Merleau-Ponty's explicit comments about photography suggest that it would be describable according to his more familiar and often asserted critique of an abstract rational view on things from a God's eye position. This would be to assert the, "geometricised projection of these perspectives and of all possible perspectives, that is, the perspectiveless position from which all can be derived".[60] As such, this persistent philosophical and

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[60] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 67. The section from which these quotations are taken is entitled, "Experience and Objective Thought, The Problem of the Body" (pp. 67-72). This short passage stands, I would say, as one of the most remarkable parts of this book (and perhaps of phenomenological philosophy in general). In it Merleau-Ponty pre-figures the account of embodied perception he gives in the much longer discussion of the body that follows this section. The linkage with

scientific fantasy of a God's eye view on the world seems to be realised by photography. If, for Merleau-Ponty, to look at an object "is to plunge oneself into it" his conception of photography as an illegitimate form of realistic representation disallows exactly this most representative aspect of vision.

If, on the basis of this account in relation to art and phenomenological aesthetics one sought to construct a more positive view of the phenomenological character of photography, then the concept of existential spatiality would seem to become a central concern. It is to clarification of this concept in the context that this discussion now turns. Indeed, there is much of interest in this conception of photography as an image form that has distinct implications for the necessity to think existential spatiality as a key category of contemporary cultural practice.

What is "Existential Spatiality"?

The conception of space developed in *The Phenomenology of Perception* is intimately related to the activities of the "spatialising" body and is developed in explicit opposition to the notion that space is abstractly definable as, for instance, that which is radically external to the body. The body as an object in space is considered to be, literally, pivotal here. It is that object amongst all others that shares some of their characteristics (it is a body one can know as an object) yet it is also the means by which one encounters and comes to know about objects (it is the means one has to know the entire world). In this context, the meaning of spatial relationships such as "up" and "down", or of any concept of direction, are, at root, meaningful only inasmuch as they are co-ordinates projected in the performance of embodied actions that are directed

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photography here is entirely my own, but it is justified by the character of Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the medium in his writings on art, as I hope to have proven in the preceding argument.

towards things. Thus: "there can only be a direction for a subject who takes it".[61] The implication of this claim is, in principle, reversible: it must also be true that there can only be a subject inasmuch as they actively "take directions". Here, what Merleau-Ponty is arguing against are apparently objective notions of space that entail elision of a fundamentally *existential* notion of spatiality, revealed through consideration of the relation between the fact of being embodied and its corollary, being in an environment or "world", in short, being always already situated. It is Merleau-Ponty's emphasis upon the analysis of embodiment that grounds his claim that general abstract notions of space and the "spatiality of the thing[s]" encountered in it are properly speaking thinkable only as unified by the primordial situation of the body's "being-in-the-world".

The two examples in which Merleau-Ponty alludes to photography quoted above from the *Phenomenology of Perception* (as a component of an experiment and as an everyday social situation) both appear at important points in the argument Merleau-Ponty presents in order to establish his claims about existential spatiality, namely, in the chapters: "The Synthesis of One's Own Body" and "Space".[62] In the former of these he argues for the "primordiality" of the body (the fundamental priority of its character as the site of origin of meaning) as a synthesising connection to the world. Thus he writes:

> Experience discloses beneath objective space, in which the body eventually finds its place, a primitive spatiality of which experience is merely the outer covering and which merges with the body's very being. To be a body, is to be tied to a certain world [...] our body is not primarily *in* space: it is *of* it.[63]

It is thus that space and the body are intimately linked in Merleau-Ponty's analysis of perception. If space is characterised as situation and world as encountered then it is discovered by the engagements of the subject that lives in it, or more properly that *lives* it. The mobile behaviour of the subject is that which ties the whole together, making

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[61] Ibid., p. 249-50.
[62] Ibid., "The Synthesis of One's Own Body, pp. 148-153 and "Space", pp. 243-298.
[63] Ibid., p. 148.

sense of its ambiguities through its actions. This can be seen in the analysis of the concept of depth that is given in *Phenomenology of Perception*, which forms an important transition from the critical analyses given of the experiments indicated above and the account of the mobile body and its behavioural grasp of the world that follows.

The phenomenological status of objects encountered in socio-historically articulated contexts is the explicit focus of the study in which Merleau-Ponty makes the observations on photography discussed above. He characterises this perceptual situation in the following, quite remarkable, passage.

> To see is to enter a universe of beings, which *display themselves*, and they would not do this if they could not be hidden behind each other or behind me. In other words: to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But in so far as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. Thus every object is the mirror of all others. When I look at the lamp on my table, I attribute to it not only the qualities visible from where I am, but also those which the chimney, the walls, the table can "see"; but back of my lamp is nothing but the face which it "shows" to the chimney. I can therefore see an object in so far as objects form a system or a world, and in so far as each one treats the others around it as spectators of its hidden aspects and as a guarantee of the permanence of those aspects.[64]

This allows one to characterise Merleau-Ponty's account of the spatio-temporality of perceptual experience and, importantly, to distinguish it from Husserl's account of experiential time. As argued in the preceding chapter, Husserl's eidetic phenomenology of temporal consciousness has become the conventional model for understanding the kinds of time one encounters in looking at photographs (most obviously expressed in the critical emphasis on the category of pastness with which one might understand photographs as memorialising representational objects). Merleau-Ponty's account of the 'systematic' perceptual structure of situated perception is articulated as an explicit critique of Husserl's eidetic phenomenology (insofar as the latter posits subjectivity as constituting at a pure transcendental level the sense of the objects it encounters). The most important difference to be noted in this context pertains to the structure attributed

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[64] Ibid., p. 68. The short section from which this passage is taken, "Experience and objective thought: The problem of the body", (pp. 67-72) serves to introduce Merleau-Ponty's longer discussion of embodiment.

consciousness of time in this dispute over the character of perception. This can be articulated as a problem in relation to the eidetic account of internal time consciousness given by Husserl in his celebrated "Lectures on Internal Time Consciousness".[65]

Husserl articulates the phenomenology of internal time consciousness at a transcendental level and according to the insight that any act, which intends an object, entails a kind of reaching out to it over time. This is taken to mean that each part of any such act intends more than any one pure "now" moment of apprehension and together these cannot be thought of an aggregate of such punctual moments. Through the act of reaching out to it, the object literally inheres over time with a certain consistency and does so, moreover, literally in the experience of it. Famously, for Husserl, the experience of temporally extended objects is conceived as a reciprocal relation in which moments of present apprehension gain their meaning through the flow of modifications

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[65] See Husserl's "Lectures on Internal Time Consciousness" from 1905, originally published in English as part of, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, ed. Martin Heidegger, trans. James S. Churchill, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964. The lectures from 1905 are reprinted in *Husserl: Shorter Works*, eds. Peter McCormick & Frederick A. Ellison, Brighton, Sussex & Notre Dame, Indiana: Harvester Press & University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, pp. 277-88 (and see the discussion of Husserl's notion of eidos in chapter 2). Further to the point one can note Remy Kwant's account of the concept of eidos and the eidetic reduction and the differences between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty's conception of these, which bear upon the way in which Husserl interprets the forms of transcendence structuring perceptual experience to imply the need to articulate a philosophical account of subjectivity as a transcendental constituting form of agency with respect to the things and situations it encounters. This move from the interrogation of things for there essential features to the ascription of a pure transcendental form to the 'I' as a central core of that encounter is the central issue. Husserl posits this constituting 'I' as the nucleus, so to speak, of the phenomenal relation. Merleau-Ponty denies any such necessary and universal ego as the nucleus of experience. For all its tendency to simplify the relation, Kwant's description of this difference is still useful:

> Husserl is convinced that there is a human essence. He knows also that this human essence has many aspects, such as corporeity and consciousness. He attempts to penetrate into the essence of man and the essential aspects of being-man. This attempt is made by means of the eidetic reduction. Philosophy would reach one of its goals, if through this reduction it could penetrate into the essential nucleus of man.
>
> According to Merleau-Ponty, however, there can be no question of human essence [in these strictly methodologically delimited terms]. True, in man everything is connected. It is not purely accidental that the same being walks erect and has a thumb that can be placed opposite the other fingers. In both these aspects of man one and the same grip on the world reveals itself. In this sense there is nothing accidental in man, for everything in him is connected with everything. However, this coherence is not guaranteed by any essence, but is a Gestalt, in which everything is interconnected. For this reason, despite all this connection, man is permeated with contingency. Man is an historical idea and not a species of nature. Thus, Merleau-Ponty is unable to apply here the eidetic reduction wanted by Husserl, for there simply is not essence to be discovered through this reduction. All we can do is understand an existential interconnection [...].

Remy Kwant, *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, Pittsburgh: Duquesne university Press, 1963, as excerpted in *Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretation*, ed. Joseph Kocklemans, New York: Doubleday, 1967, p. 384.

of past moments and in the active grasping/presentation of new moments. This structure is expressed in terms of the temporal modalities of the object as a kind of identity in the face of change, aspects of which emerge in anticipation of the more or less immanent future and which maintain their consistency by dint of they way these recede progressively into stages of the more or less recent past. The experience of things as they unfold over time is characterised by the orientation of these phases. Husserl names the implied *directedness* of such phases, "retention", "primal impression" and "protention". One implication of this articulation pertains to the prior status of the mysterious metaphysical notion of a punctual "now" in philosophical discourse. The problematic character of this notion is in some senses critically refigured and dissolved into the theoretical structure of directed phases of temporal modes. Yet the punctuality of 'now' is also displaced and extended, directed in the form of organisation of noematic relations between intentional consciousness and its objects and finds its register in a transcendental ego, or "absolute subjectivity" that is taken to constitute the objects of experience. So, the critically dissolved givenness of the punctual now remains in some sense as an eidetic condition of the directed and modal form of temporal apprehension. Nevertheless, what the notion of 'primordiality' in the 'primal impression' is taken to describe is not supposed to be discreet as it is a component part of the relation between the essence of experienced temporality and how one might approach or think it as it necessarily plays itself out in experience of things. This is an important point, as the three terms of internal time consciousness do not refer to explicitly formed memory, a 'whole' present experience and the consciously expected future. Rather, what might previously have been thought of under the name of a problematically pure punctual now, is shifted into the noematic structure of the transcendental account of what is most eidetic in experience for Husserl; the temporal

form of flux that indicates the transcendental character of the constituting acts of absolute subjectivity. The distinctness of expectations and the formation of memory, for instance, in their bracketed form, are denied and what these are based in is revealed as a complex and intertwined relation between retention and protention that both appear implicated in and structured by each other as moments of anticipated emergence, fading, but still held in the 'just-past', on the one hand, and as a kind of informing of unfolding phases of the object structured by the openness of the just-past to what is emergent.

It is in Merleau-Ponty's critique of the transcendental character of temporality in Husserl's thought that one can find a stringently phenomenological counter to the Barthesian appropriation of the eidetic reduction and, more importantly, of the projection of an critical account of cultural experience that renders entirely eidetic any claim to aesthetic value.

Merleau-Ponty rejects the notion of constitutive subjectivity that underpins Husserl's (and by implication also Barthes's) account of temporality. He retains the structure of temporal consciousness articulated by Husserl to the extent that it is characterised in terms of a theory of perspective adumbrations, but this is set within a theory of the perceptual organisation of point-horizon and figure-ground relations. Thus, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> To see an object is either to have it on the fringe of the visual field and be able to concentrate on it, or else respond to this summons by actually concentrating upon it. When I do concentrate my eyes on it, I become anchored in it, but this coming to rest of my gaze is merely a modality of its movement: I continue inside one object the exploration which earlier hovered over them all, and in one movement I close up the landscape and open the object. [...] The inner horizon of an object cannot become an object without the surrounding objects' becoming a horizon, and so vision is an act with two facets. For I do not identify the detailed object which I now have with that over which my gaze ran a few minutes ago, by expressly comparing these details with a memory of my first general view. When, in a film, the camera is trained on an object and moves nearer to it to give a close up view, we can *remember* that we are being shown the ash tray or an actor's hand, we do not actually identify it. This is because the screen has no horizons. In normal vision, on the other hand, I direct my gaze upon a sector of the landscape, which comes to life and is disclosed, while the other objects recede into the periphery and become dormant, while, however, not ceasing to be there. Now, with them, I have at my disposal their horizons, in which there is implied, as a marginal view, the object on which my eyes fall at present. The horizon, then, is what guarantees the identity of the object throughout the exploration; it is the correlative of the impending power which my gaze retains over the objects which it has just surveyed.[66]

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[66] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 67-8.

This remarkable amalgam of the Husserlian theory of perspectival perception (characterised by forms of immanence and transcendence and the gestalt theory of figure and horizon) extends temporality into a theory of spatial dimensions. It is important to note that, in the process, both space and time retain and serve to explain one's perception of socio-historical meanings of things as well as the forms of transcendence through which they appear. Thus: "My human gaze never *posits* more than one facet of the object, even though by means of horizons it is directed towards all the others. It can never come up against previous appearances or those presented to other people other than through the intermediary of time and language".[67] But Merleau-Ponty takes this Husserlian claim to mean that temporality, shorn of its purely transcendental character is only ever experienced as the *dimensional* character of what a temporal encounter with something in the world means. To say that time here is always spatial would be more correct but this, perhaps, very familiar claim on Merleau-Ponty's part requires clarification. This can be given through further examination of photographs as phenomenological objects of a certain class (bearing in mind that one would be unwise to accept the effective, strategic and somewhat cynical definition of photography Merleau-Ponty asserts throughout).

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[67] Ibid., p. 69. The distinctiveness of this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is described by Michael B. Smith in, "Merleau-Ponty's Aesthetics" as essay published in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*. Smith describes the entwinement of notions like the gaze, gesture, lived experience, embodiment and the life world in which they find themselves shaped by encounters with things and other perceiving subjects, thus:

> With the *Phenomenology of Perception* we move from the level of critique of the experimental sciences to the fuller exploration of the *Lebenswelt* adumbrated in Husserl's posthumous works; but with the difference that Merleau-Ponty continues to adduce supporting evidence for his speculations from the observations of the German Gestalt psychologists Gelb, Goldstein and Kohler. The notion of the lived body ("*Corps propre*", more specifically "one's own body"), introduced into French existentialism by Gabriel Marcel, becomes the "natural subject" of perception. Space, time, and the objects of the surrounding world are less undergone than constituted by this lived body, of which science's physiological body is but a weakened derivative – a copy.
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> The body, seat of perception, is also the locus of expression. The gesture accomplishes a transcendence in inherence, for the virtual line extending from the tip of my finger to the object designated gives meaning and direction ("*sens*") to space and expresses at the same time *my* meaning (the extension of my intention) to other subjectivities. The spoken word, also, has a gestural meaning. Language, before being a code or a depository of established meanings, is but a generalised style, a way of "singing the world" (*Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 187).

Smith, p. 195.

From a phenomenological viewpoint photographs don't seem to be as rich, labile, experientially complex, or bodily engaging as the things and places they might depict. The problem can be highlighted by considering a typical phenomenological example. The landscape around which one can move and which reveals as one does so a flow of perceptual relations to new, and perhaps previously hidden, aspects of place, provokes acts of perceptual engagement that orient one's attempts to make sense of the situation. Existential phenomenology characterises this, in general, as a fundamental condition of "being-in-the-world", which structures human life and informs even its most highly specified, social and cultural aspects.[68] When, in this context Merleau-Ponty writes: "The unity of the object is based upon the foreshadowing of an imminent order which is about to spring upon us as a reply to questions merely latent in the landscape", one can see, perhaps, why photographs would be positioned as rather impoverished. In short, they do not appear to possess this specifically relational quality of latency.[69] But, if the lamp and the table as already distinctively social and cultural objects, (products of economic relations and historical forces) show their faces to each other and possess (or possess one) by dint of showing in such latency then why not photographs? They are undoubtedly very different kinds of object, the former rounded with many aspects, the latter thin and flat. But they do seem to share the situated and social characteristic of being objects in the purview of socially situated perception. Perhaps photographs show a different kind of face, so to speak, one that is more generically determined in its occupation of space? If, as Merleau-Ponty insists through the *Phenomenology of Perception* other forms of technology (hats, cars, blind men's' sticks, spectacles and

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[68] A very clear description of this aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, its roots in Heidegger's account of being-in-the-world and the critical importance of Merleau-Ponty's development of the concept for recent debates in epistemology is given by Charles Taylor, "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture" in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, eds. Taylor Carmen and Mark B. N. Hanson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 26-49.
[69] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 17.

other kinds of prostheses) are incorporated through habitual use into the schematic world of bodily engagements with the environment, then why not photographic images? Perhaps photographic forms and objects of different kinds have distinctive modes of latency, such as one might claim is indicated in the artworks of Bochner and La Rocca discussed above? Such considerations could give a clue to a general and distinctive phenomenological characterisation of the kinds of photographic image Merleau-Ponty discusses (and perhaps be also more generally applicable in more specific terms). They show things in a reifying fashion because their internal horizons are weak or impoverished, but they also stand alongside all other cultural objects as being intrinsically phenomenal as their external horizons are labile and rich with latent possibilities.

Merleau-Ponty's limited consideration of photography rules out any description of the act of producing photographs or of their ubiquitous presence in other forms in the spaces of social life. Others have discussed these aspects of photographic culture in existential terms that would seem to offer the possibility for a socially articulated phenomenological analysis. For instance, consider John Berger's account of the social function of photographic production.

> Photographs bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation. A photograph is a result of the photographer's decision that it is worth recording that this particular event of the particular object has been seen. If everything that existed were continually being photographed, every photograph would become meaningless. A photograph celebrates neither the event itself nor the faculty of sight in itself. A photograph is already a message about the event it records.[70]

Berger's description presents material for an existential description of the making of photographic images and the social basis for their significance. His epistemological reservations notwithstanding, there is nothing in Merleau-Ponty's view of photography

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[70] John Berger, "Understanding a Photograph", originally published in *The Look of Things*, London: Viking Press, 1974, and republished in *Classic Essays on Photography* (from which this reference is taken), p. 292.

that necessarily contradicts Berger's view. Berger describes a general case of photography as existential decision. The account of photographic art to be given here is a self-reflexive possibility of the sphere marked out by such decision.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy comes, in its later development, to conceive of modernity as suggesting a "mutation of the relationship between humanity and Being", a situation that is fraught with literal danger.[71] Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of photography are an example of what he comes in this period to call "operational thinking", a deep attitudinal tendency that threatens to overtake practices of perception in modernity and that does so through the technicisation of lived experience as such. The notion of operational thinking is key in his later thought. In very broad terms technical forms of thought tend to render "perceivers" into operationally manipulabile units of calculation. In this light, it is not stretching things too far to think the following passage from "Eye and Mind" in terms specific to photography.

> If this kind of thinking were to extend its domain over humanity and history; and if, ignoring what we know of them through contact and our own situations, it were to set out to construct them on the basis of a few abstract indices [...] then, since the human being truly becomes the *manipulandum* he thinks he is, we enter into a cultural regimen in which there is neither truth nor falsehood concerning humanity and history, into a sleep, or nightmare from which there is no awakening.[72]

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[71] This is a modified version of an observation that Merleau-Ponty makes in "Eye and Mind", quoted by Mauro Carbone in a recently published collection of essays on Merleau-Ponty's later writings, *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty's A-Philosophy*, Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2004, p. xiii. In the passage from which it is taken, Merleau-Ponty discusses artworks as being imbued with a kind of life that exceeds historical determinations and describes his relation to them as a layman in the following terms:

> But such a labour demands a long familiarity with history. I lack everything for its execution, both competence and space. But since the power or the fecundity of works of art exceeds every positive causal or linear relation, is it not legitimate for a layman such as myself, speaking from his memory of a few paintings and books, to express how painting enters into his reflections, and *to register his sense of a profound dissonance, a transformation in the relationship between humanity and Being, when he holds up a universe of classical thought, contrasting it en bloc with the explorations of modern painting*. A sort of history by contact [...], "Eye and Mind", p. 139 (my emphasis).

[72] Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 122. In the context of a reading of "Cézanne's Doubt" that seeks to understand Merleau-Ponty as "seeking to make the phenomenological reduction experientially real", Monika Langer gives a definition of "operational thinking". She does so with a view to articulating a feminist theory of pre-reflective, embodied perception in an analysis of Merleau-Ponty's "insights and shortcomings. Her aim is to think questions of gender differentiated embodiment and its 'insinuation' in the world:

> He is highly critical of 'operational' thinking – a thinking that dichotomises, decontextualises, reifies, and manipulates phenomena. Such thinking separates nature from humans and regards meaning as springing solely from the latter. Merleau-Ponty stresses the need to subvert this interiorisation of meaning and to re-establish the bonds between humans and the (so-called) natural world. He recognizes that this can be accomplished only if pre-reflective experiences of interrogation are reawakened. Unfortunately, Merleau-Ponty is oblivious to issues of gender and tends to transform masculine modes of perception into allegedly universal structures of experience.

The historical conditions that suggest a transformative relation to Being as such are, in this context, also productive of the "absolute artificialism" of the form of "operational thinking" that characterises the technologically saturated and objectified forms of modern experience of social being.[73] Such critically apocalyptic comments are few and briefly expressed in Merleau-Ponty's writings. This has led to them being largely overlooked in critical discourse on his work. They remain, nonetheless, absolutely central. In this context, art, and especially painting, is projected as a practice that "draws upon" the "fabric of brute meaning, which operationalism would prefer to ignore".[74] "Brute meaning" here is that which is projected through an interrogation of the world that avoids instrumentalisation by dint of its holistic perspective and relatively indeterminate procedures. This is a possibility imagined in a context for which: "The depth of the existing world and an unfathomable God no longer stand over against the flatness of 'technicised' thought".[75] (The disappearance of God, here, is viewed as part and parcel of the secularist tendency in developing modernism, a theological remnant that has been rejected by history, so to speak. Yet in Merleau-Ponty's view, the form this rejection has taken left a historical "vacuum" into which rationalism and empiricism rushed, carving up the world into "two faithful and unfaithful consequences of Cartesianism, two monsters born from its dismemberment").[76] His late aesthetics are written in response to this general possibility and this distinctly historical emphasis should, (though more often than not it doesn't) colour interpretation of the ontological impulse of Merleau-Ponty's later aesthetics. It textures, or gives context to the hints that

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However, this tendency can remind feminists that a corresponding gynocentric universalism is equally unsatisfactory.

"Making the Phenomenological Reduction Experientially Real", *Resistance, Flight, Creation: Feminist Enactments of French Philosophy*, ed. Dorothea Olkowski, New York: Cornell University Press, 2000, pp. 138-9.

[73] Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 122.

[74] Ibid., p.123.

[75] Ibid., p. 137.

he gives as to his feeling that a "mutation of the relationship between humanity and Being" is occurring in the present historical epoch.[77] It is also the key to a phenomenological account of the possibility that the combination of a critical impulse in photographic art (as this transforms the notion of art and as it shifts the function of technical mediation of experience towards examining the relations between body and world in socio-historical terms) might be explicable in terms of Merleau-Ponty's account of perception.

Understanding of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy has generally taken the form of commentary on two relational-conceptual structures of influence; the Husserlian and Gestalt psychology themes. This tends to miss the complexity of his thought and the generality and scope of the *problematic* status of perception for philosophical reflection. As noted earlier, Merleau-Ponty's view of perception is also shaped by a range of other critical engagements, here, notably, with the Bergsonian discourse of affect and with the biological sciences and the notion of environment (Umwelt).[78] Such problematic structuring perspectives are related by a theorisation of levels of spatiality, which serve, quite literally, to incorporate perceptual sense in the processes of one's body as an organism, and at the level of its mode of insertion into social meaning and history. On

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[77] Ibid., p. 139. This (slightly modified translation) of a comment made by Merleau-Ponty in "Eye and Mind" orients Mauro Carbone's recent study, *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty's A-Philosophy*, trans. Elizabeth Locey, Nicoletta Grillo, Romano Ullah Khan and Giacomo Carissimi, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Pres, 2004, p. xiii. In the passage from which it is taken, Merleau-Ponty discusses artworks as being imbued with a kind of life that exceeds historical determinations and describes his relation to them as a layman in the following terms:

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[78] These critical engagements are, characteristically entwined in his writings, for instance, see *The Structure of Behaviour*, trans. Alden L. Fisher, Pittsburgh: Duquense University Press, 1983, especially the section "The Human Order", in which according to a structuring framework of levels of organisation that is Hegelian in form, he makes appeal to the theoretical biological writings of Jacob von Uexküll, especially his notion of *umwelt*, which functions as a critical hinge, so to speak, in a simultaneous critique of the Bergsonian notion of "centres of indeterminacy" and Kantian apriorism.

that basis one could consider a film to be a temporal gestalt on the model of musical melody has a deep resonance with the notion that "vital acts *have* a meaning", and that, as Merleau-Ponty quotes Uexküll, "Every organism is a melody which sings itself".[79] Here one finds an odd, highly metaphorical but interesting suggestion of the specific "fleshy" body and the correlatively "fleshy" cultural product "singing", so to speak, to each other over, and through the level of organisation that is subjective experience of the objective world.

The organism that sings itself does so in the form of an engagement with the world, which at a human level must mean that things sing too, so to speak. They retain something of the sociality of their articulated meanings, even at the most basic perceptual level. The organism singing itself as a melody at a vital level is, according to the logic of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, intrinsically reversible when reflected upon. In cultural terms one might then have to risk the odd sounding summary: the objects and the body sing each other as a song of sedimented social meaning. The notion of such reciprocity involves the interpenetration of the social functions of objects and the minimal perceptual operations of the body and this is simultaneously a necessary limitation and the expansive promise of perception here. It is imbued with social meaning inasmuch as one's presence to things and the presence of others to this field of things are saturated with uses and functions. These uses and functions circumscribe the ontological conditions of possible experience, though, at least at its best, not in a way that falls into a deterministic theory of the impingement of things on consciousness. The lamp, chimney and the table remain lamps and chimneys and tables, with something of their generic socio-historical meaning somehow conditioning and being conditioned by

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[79] Merleau-Ponty, *The Structure of Behaviour*, p. 159.

their emergence in the perceptual field that philosophy (or any discourse) can interrogate.

The photograph's "impoverished" character is, perhaps, of all the objects discussed by Merleau-Ponty, exemplary inasmuch as it interrupts the relation just described. On Merleau-Ponty's terms, the photograph has a quite resistant and unambiguous character as an "event" in this field. Any object, by dint of being perceivable, as an object, must "look back" and be "looked at" by others. Merleau-Ponty's critique of the objective understanding of subject / object relations seeks to loosen, and then later, to totally dissolve the rigid hypostatisation of objective experience, and "the photograph" as he conceives it is resistant to this aim. Inasmuch as they cannot look back at other objects in the context of perceptual immersion in a world of relation between more or less mediated and directly present "others", its primary function, that which it is designed to do, and has been continually refined to achieve, its paradigmatic ability to look at and register the exact appearances of everything and anything, is precisely that which prevents it from taking place in a world of things that show themselves to each other, and look at each other showing themselves to each other under the gaze of a community of perceivers.

It is precisely the relationship between the body, the world and their mediation in forms of cultural modernity, that might be threatened by such forms of thought that Merleau-Ponty interrogates in his philosophy of art and that informs his entire philosophy. It is the conception and function of art within this broader project that offers a means to think of what photographic art later became in Merleau-Pontian terms that deploy photography as a critique of operational thinking. In order to outline what is meant here, Merleau-Ponty's notion of the relations between body and world need to be

elaborated in terms of his conception of existential spatiality and this, in turn, set in relation to his later notions of chiasm and flesh.

A distinctive thesis regarding the "primacy of perception" structures Merleau-Ponty's entire thought. The passage quoted above that describes the relations between cultural objects encountered in a social setting, shows the manner in which Merleau-Ponty takes the notion of gestalt to inform and to critically resolve the problem of constitutive egological idealism in Husserl's theory of perspective modifications, or adumbration (*Abschattungen*).

Following Husserl, Merleau-Ponty makes perception central to the project of phenomenological philosophy. This takes the form of a commitment that emphasis on perception should act as the meaningful ground of all reflection, be it scientific, philosophical or pertaining to art and everyday experience.[80] Husserl described the experience of things as unfolding over time from a particular position and through modifications of points of view. An object never being seen as a whole, yet reflection on which must take account of the fact that in experience it is treated as such. Those aspects of it that remain invisible in each perception of its partial form informs and contributes to the perceptual construction of the whole as something seen, thought or used. This fact incorporates a form of transcendence in perceptual experience and does so despite the fact that the object is taken to be really present to experience. The flowing, changeable character of partial appearances characterizes the reality of

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[80] Merleau-Ponty's work presents an extended and consistent interrogation of the relationships pertaining between various experimentally based sciences, the idea of science itself and the conditions of comprehensibility of the "human sciences", seen from a philosophical and historical viewpoint. The evocative metaphor of science "secreting ontology" that is used here, is taken from one such explicit attempt to think the relation between philosophy and sociology. The relevant passage reads:

> We need neither tear down the behavioural sciences to lay the foundations of philosophy, nor tear down philosophy to lay the foundations of the behavioural sciences. Every science secretes an ontology; every ontology anticipates a body of knowledge. It is up to us to come to terms with this situation and see to it that both philosophy and science are possible.

Merleau-Ponty, "The Philosopher and Sociology", in *Signs* trans. Richard C. McCleary, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1964.

perception whilst also rendering it impossible to complete. Husserl infers that the actions of a constituting ego give consistency to this form of perceptual experience. The complexities of this aspect of Husserl's transcendental notion of perception are described elegantly by Renaud Barbaras.

> We find ourselves therefore in a strange situation since the manifestation presents an object that is none other than that in which it is presented; the manifestation is surpassed toward the object, but this surpassing gives rise to nothing more than another manifestation. Thus it disappears, being replaced by the object that is erased simultaneously by its manifestation; unveiling the object, it veils it, since the latter is never grasped as distinct from what reveals it. In short, the manifestation presents the object as what itself remains unpresentable. This is why Husserl can speak of adumbration. The adumbration already gives what it outlines; it presents it, but insofar as it is only an adumbration it sidesteps what is outlined and postpones the full manifestation of it; in the adumbration, the object is presented rigorously as what requires formulation, and it has no other tenor beyond the adumbration than this requirement itself. Thus in perception the adumbration and the adumbrated object, the manifestation and what appears, are affected by a double constitutive ambiguity. The adumbration is simultaneously itself and the object it presents; it is the identity of itself and its surpassing (in other words, its obliteration). As for the object, it is simultaneously present in the sense that it is attained in person and indefinitely absent in the sense that no series of adumbrations can exhaust the tenor of being; it is the identity of a coming to presence and a retreat into the unpresentable.[81]

Merleau-Ponty's response to the notion of constituting subjectivity is to refigure the notion of perception that is central to it, according to Gestalt psychology's assertion that the most basic possible instance of anything given to perception is a that of a figure set against a ground.

> A figure on a ground is the simplest sensible given that we can obtain, [and] this is not a contingent characteristic of factual perception [...] It is the very definition of the phenomenon of perception, that without which a phenomenon cannot be said to be perception at all. The perceptual 'something' is always in the 'milieu' of something else, it is always part of a field. A really homogeneous area offering nothing to perception cannot be given to any perception.[82]

It cannot be stressed too much that this combination of the theory of perspectival modifications and the Gestalt theory of figure-ground relations suffuses all of Merleau-Ponty's extrapolations from the notion of perception. This might be misinterpreted as it is now a commonplace to assert of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy that it modulates Husserl's phenomenology through incorporation of the notion of Gestalt. What is less often remarked is that the notion of Gestalt, figure-ground and point-horizon relations as

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[81] Renaud Barbaras, *Desire and Distance: An Introduction to the Phenomenology of Perception*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 14.
[82] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 10.

the basic forms of perception, in their turn, are transformed by their conceptual relation to the theorisation of immanence and transcendence in Husserl's account of perception. For Merleau-Ponty, this conceptual admixture informs not only 'basic' epistemological questions or reflection upon the ontological characteristics of consciousness, but, saturates all perceptual, linguistic, cultural and historical experience. Thus, the relation to things articulated by dint of their "showing themselves to each other" speaks to the enigmatic possibility that they embody some kind of residual cultural aspect or socio-historical meaning at the most basic level of any account of perceptual experience of them. As such, they exceed or resist reduction to the terms of the transcendental acts of a constituting consciousness or ego. The lamp and the table are never simply sensible givens, nor are they ideal essences. Any experience of them, no matter how basic, is suffused by their social meanings and as objects of reflection they transcend their appearances in the direction of textured social and historical existence. The notion of gestalt (shape, form or configuration) is, famously, a development from the insights of Gestalt Psychology's theorisation of perception in terms of a holistic, experimentally based consideration of perception; importantly, in terms of figure ground relations between objects and their environments. Merleau-Ponty's use of this concept, as discussed above, concerns perception as an ontological problem for science that informs the existential situation of socio-historical subjects. The sense in which the notion of gestalt can be said to be "extended" in its conceptual range of reference should be noted here, as it saturates virtually all of Merleau-Ponty's more 'journalistic' articles and his cultural criticism, in which a notion of the projected 'coherence' of subjectivity is asserted as something striven for, yet never realised; an "idea or limit that is never reached".[83] This general existential characterisation of the limits of attainment of a

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[83] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, p. 72.

coherent sense of life is explicitly derived from his account of the flux of relations between figure and ground and object and horizon, as they are developed in terms of the spatio-temporal characteristics of a world experienced in its depth. The double sense of giving "shape" to one's world introduces a certain porosity of the relations between nature and culture in a rather complex and open manner. Gestalt, with all its indication of minimal acts of perceptual awareness, is a term that also describes, for Merleau-Ponty, "higher levels" of the organisation of experience, though what I am calling here the "porosity" between such distinctions between "levels" are highly ambiguous constructions.

> This decisive moment when certain particles of matter, words, and events allow themselves to be animated by a meaning, the nearest contours of which they suggest without containing, is above all the fundamental keynote of the world which is already given with the least of our perceptions.[84]

It follows from the above that this "keynote" resonates with the most culturally developed forms of perception as well. There is a degree of ambiguity in the relationship between Merleau-Ponty's account of seeing man made objects and the encounters one might have with other embodied subjects as these encounters will always take their place within the same world of perceptual relationality.

> The world has meaning [*signification*] only because it has direction. Every localization of objects in the world presupposes my locality. In a sense, an object of perception continuously speaks to us of ourselves. As incarnate subjects, we are expressed by the object. *It is already in front of us as an other, thereby helping us to understand how there might be perception of other people.*[85]

Cultural objects speak to us of the even more enigmatic status of other people, which they also participate in. They do so by exerting a certain weighty, expressive pressure upon the perceptual acts through which one encounters them and this pressure is a form of social articulation. It is in this context that Merleau-Ponty writes, in the preface to

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[84] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *In Praise of Philosophy and Other Essays*, p. 46.

[85] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Experience of Others", *Merleau-Ponty and Psychology*, Keith Hoeller (ed.), New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993. "The Experience of Others" is the text of a lecture series Merleau-Ponty delivered in the last year of his professorship in Child Psychology and Pedagogy at the Sorbonne in 1951-2.

The Phenomenology of Perception, that perception is a "vital communication with the world which makes it present as a familiar setting of our life".[86] It is from this insight that Merleau-Ponty derives his celebrated view that perception is ambiguous with regard to the normative forms through which it has been thought historically. Whilst perception is intrinsically caught up in a web of expressive socio-historical relations, viewed in terms of the embodied perceptual relations that it structures it resists reduction to the terms of an externalised, normative form.

> Perception is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions.[87]

Iris Young gives a good description of what this means for linguistically or socially mediated experience in an account of female embodiment.

> Consciousness has a foundation in perception, the lived body's feeling and moving among things, with an active purposive orientation. Unlike a Cartesian materialist body, the lived body has culture and meaning inscribed in its habits, in its specific forms of perception and comportment. Description of this embodied existence is important because, while laden with culture and significance, the meaning embodied in habit, feeling, and perceptual orientation is usually nondiscursive.[88]

And in a critical commentary on the usefulness of Young's theorisation of embodied experience for feminist social criticism, Linda Martín Alcoff observes, further to the same point, that:

> Such an account does not understand the meaningfulness of gesture as supervenient on linguistic practice nor as positioned outside of culture and history. Rather, meaning is produced through the embodied actions of consciousness in the world, some of which involve linguistic practices and some of which do not. Social practice, and thus experience, is not the *result* of discourse, but the *site* where meaning is developed.[89]

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[86] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 52.
[87] Ibid., pp. x-xi.
[88] Iris Young, "Throwing Like a Girl", in *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and social Theory*, Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1990. p. 14.
[89] Linda Martín Alcoff, "Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience", in *Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, eds. F. Evans and Louise Lawlor, Albany New York: SUNY Press, 2000, p. 260. Perhaps the most important critique of Merleau-Ponty in these terms is Judith Butler's compelling account of Merleau-Ponty's masculine bias in his discussion of the body in the chapter on sexuality in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Butler's criticism is that Merleau-Ponty gives an account of the sexed body that—in its general treatment of the body and refusal to specify differences between the social experience of sexed and gendered embodied subjects—ends up asserting universal characteristics of all bodies in masculine terms. On Butler's view, his overly generic account takes misogyny to be an intrinsic feature of perception. These aspects of Butler's criticisms are compelling. However, they do not suggest,

The *Phenomenology of Perception* takes as its methodological approach a double critique of empiricist and idealist assumptions of, respectively, the world as a composite of discreet given units or datum of given sensible experience and the constituting and totalised organisational operations of the cogito, ego or rationally determined subject (the positions of empiricism and idealism). Consequently, his account of perception at this point is structured by the task of revealing that these tendencies of thought result in the same end; the projection of an already completed perceptual world that presupposes, ultimately, a form of rationality that has the ability to survey the world abstractly and from an impossible viewpoint, which Merleau-Ponty describes as a 'view from nowhere'. The inscription of all perceptual subjects in a world amenable to linguistic expression is an important part of his critical response to these alternatives. Language is a kind of universal mode of expression of existential possibility but it is also historically and socially contingent. It is not an 'add on' feature of the kinds of experience in question as Cornelius Castoriadis points out in the following succinct interpretation.

> The acquisition of language is the precondition of thought. There is no *Sinngebung* by means of which the subject confers meaning upon signs that are devoid of it (and it is not long before the idea of *Sinngebung* as such comes to be rejected: 'every active process of signification or *Sinngebung*' is 'derivative and secondary in relation to that pregnancy of meaning within signs which may define the world' (Ph. P., p. 429)). 'Thus we refute both intellectualism and empiricism by simply saying that *the word has a meaning*' (Ph. P., p. 177) we find him calmly writing, in full awareness, no doubt, of the shockingly naive appearance of this remark.[90]

James Schmidt clarifies what this might mean when viewed in relation to the arbitrary character of the sign in more conventional interpretations of Saussure's linguistic schema.

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as she seems to think, that this would render Merleau-Ponty's entire account of embodied experience dubious. Butler's critique of Merleau-Ponty is articulated in her essay, "Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description: A Feminist Critique of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*" and is to be found in *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy*, eds. J. Allen and Iris Young, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989.

[90] Cornelius Castoriadis, "The Sayable and the Unsayable", in *Crossroads in the Labyrinth*, trans. Kate Soper & Martin Ryle, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984, p. 121.

> If the relation of signifier to signified is indeed 'arbitrary' and 'unmotivated', then it clearly escapes the intentions of the speaking subject. To understand the way signs are related to one another, it is necessary to turn away from the subject and consider instead the system which is alleged to govern their deployment.[91]

The character of what 'system' might mean here is crucial. The fundamentally descriptive character of photographs places them in a strong sense in close proximity to this conception of the systematic character of perceptual engagements and such systems are perceptual, through and through. It is one's embodied relation to the world and the things in it that subtends all meaning; hence Merleau-Ponty's stress on sense as that directional engagement with environmental conditions that has the form of expressive becoming and hence his stress on the situation of speech, or the enunciation of the meaning of Being.

Thus, the question of the in-person character of immediate perceptual experience is rendered problematic by Merleau-Ponty and is definitively not a means of asserting a pre-linguistic mode of visual communication. However, what the character of expression is in this context remains ambiguous as can be seen in Merleau-Ponty's thematisation of relationships between nature and culture.

> Since perception itself is complete, since our perspectives give us a world to express and think about which envelops and exceeds those perspectives, a world which announces itself in lightning signs as a spoken word or as an arabesque, why should the expression of the world be subjected to the prose of the *senses* or of the concept? It must be poetry; that is, it must completely awaken and recall our sheer power of expressing beyond things already said or seen. Modern painting presents a problem completely different from that of the return to the individual: the problem of knowing how one can communicate without the help of a pre-established Nature which all men's senses open upon, the problem of knowing how we are grafted to the universal by that which is most our own.[92]

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[91] James Schmidt, *Merleau-Ponty Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, p.164. A quite remarkable recent study that puts a range of Merleau-Pontian concepts to use in a sociological inquiry into the experience of contemporary working class life in northern England (specifically, Rotherham) is, Simon J. Charlesworth's, *A Phenomenology of Working Class Experience*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. placing great emphasis on Merleau-Ponty's account of expression as an aspect of the social character of being-the-world and articulating this through an account of the barriers to communication that face the people he worked with on the study and the inadequacy of 'conventional' sociological methods in the context, Charlesworth seeks to articulate "a world that is lived in primarily as realised practices, behaviours latent with meaning, rather than self-transparent conscious projects" (p. 22) to give an account of the relationships between place, socio-economic factors shaping its specificity and the forms of 'use' these factors both facilitate and limit.

[92] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 52.

Some further clarification of the relation between this account of perceptual experience and the centrality of a notion of existential spatiality to it is necessary, as it is within this conceptual relation and the socio-historical sphere of phenomenological experience it describes, that the critical possibilities of a phenomenology of photography will find its purchase on contemporary culture.

Space, for Merleau-Ponty is characterised according to a notion of the embodied production of its sense for perceiving beings. Critical philosophical reflection reveals this as a sphere inhabited by what he calls a body-subject; the pre-personal, pre-objective, non-positing but, nonetheless, sense-making operative intentionality of the body that subtends, structures and facilitates all objective experience.

> Experience discloses beneath objective space, in which the body eventually finds its place, a primitive spatiality of which experience is merely the outer covering and which merges with the body's very being. To be a body, is to be tied to a certain world [...] our body is not primarily *in* space: it is *of* it.[93]

The world/body relation is to be understood in terms of this subterranean aspect of the body and the ways in which it makes sense of environment as the sphere upon which it can act.

> What counts for the orientation of the spectacle is not my body as it in fact is, as a thing in objective space, but as a system of possible actions, a virtual body with its phenomenal "place" defined by its task and situation. My body is wherever there is something to be done. [...] It is, then, a certain possession of the world by my body, a certain gearing of my body to the world.[94]

It is this relation between "gearing towards" and "possession of" that structures Merleau-Ponty's concept of existential situation in *Phenomenology of Perception.* In this context: "Even if the universal form of space is that without which there would be for us no bodily space, it is not that by which there is one".[95] Being as such is a singular sphere of action inhabited by embodied perceptual entities and as such it is an

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[93] Ibid., p. 148.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., p. 101.

inherently intersubjective, temporally complex natural, cultural and historical context, the character of which is given through the temporalisation of the notion of space.

Depth is arguably *the* existential spatial dimension for Merleau-Ponty. Its characterisation has a central role in establishing the theory of existential spatiality in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, and it persists as a pivotal theme in his later works such as "Eye and Mind" and the *Visible and Invisible*. In the former, the existential thematisation of depth destabilises the relationship between and the constitutive coherence of subject / object relations. Later, Merleau-Ponty attempts to dissolve these constitutive characteristics of consciousness by developing a general theory of the carnal character of the world. He does this, famously, through the concept of "flesh"; a deeply ambiguous, metaphoric concept developed to generalise his account of perceptual being-in-the-world so as to understand the chiasmatic relation of touch both as a logically reversible reciprocal emergence of sense, and as saturated with desire. The significance of Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh remains ambiguous and contested. Claude Lefort offers a description of its peculiarities.

> To think flesh, we have to think a genesis that is a self-genesis, more precisely, to think something as a movement of self-begetting. [...] A singular sensible emerges from the mass of the sensible by a sort of coiling up, and through redoubling, turns back upon itself—that is to say, at the same time, upon the whole sensible—so that a double doubling occurs, the body becoming at once sentient and sensible and distinct from the external world that it continues to belong to, to adhere to.[96]

In Merleau-Ponty's earlier discussions, depth is conceived as an active existential relation to things, comprising fluid modulations of the perceptual grasping of their actuality: "It is the dimension in which things or elements of things envelop each other,

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[96] Claude Lefort, "Flesh and Otherness", *Ontology and Alterity in Merleau-Ponty*, Galen Johnson & Michael Smith (eds.), Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990, p. 5. See also the critical responses to Lefort's interpretation of the concept as given in the same volume by M. C. Dillon, "Écart: Reply to Lefort's 'Flesh and Otherness'", pp. 14-26, and Gary Brent Madison's "Flesh as Otherness", pp. 27-34, in the same volume.

whereas breadth and height are the dimensions in which they are juxtaposed."[97] Importantly, this means that depth is a "temporal elucidation" of space.

> When I say that I see an object at a distance, I mean that I already hold it, or that I still hold it, it is in the future or in the past as well as being in space. [...] The order of "co-existents" is inseparable from "the order of sequences", or rather time is not only the consciousness of a sequence. Perception provides me with a "field of presence" in the broad sense, extending in two dimensions: the here-there dimension and the past-present-future dimension. The second elucidates the first.[98]

The existential articulation of this conception of depth perception "loosens" the constitutive separation between the perceiver as subject and the object that they grasp as distant from them. These terms do, however, remain polarised in the earlier account of their relation. Here, depth is, "a being simultaneously present in experiences which are nevertheless mutually exclusive".[99] Nevertheless, this analysis is motivated by a desire to discover "a primordial depth, which confers upon the other its significance, and which is the thickness of a medium devoid of anything".[100] Later, in *The Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty indicates that the theorisation of depth would have been central to development of the concept of flesh. Thus, in one of his "working notes" he writes:

> Depth is the means the things have to remain distinct, to remain things while not being what I look at at present. It is pre-eminently the dimension of the simultaneous. Without it, there would not be a world or Being, there would only be a mobile zone of distinctness which could not be brought here without questioning all the rest—and a "synthesis" of these "views". Whereas, by virtue of depth, they coexist in degrees of proximity, they slip into one another and interrogate themselves. It is hence because of depth that the things have a flesh: that is, oppose to my inspection obstacles a resistance which is precisely their reality, their "openness", their *totum simul*. The look does not overcome depth, it goes round it. Depth is *urstiftet* [originarily instituted] in what I see in clear vision as the retention is in the present—without "intentionality"—[101]

This discussion of depth as the characteristic dimension of spatiality for Merleau-Ponty foregrounds a problem in the orientation of interpretation of his work. This is a problem that structures and divides scholarly work on his philosophy. Merleau-Ponty

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[97] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 264-5.
[98] Ibid., p. 265.
[99] Ibid., p. 264.
[100] Ibid., p. 266.
[101] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 219.

reflected throughout his career on the themes of embodiment, perception and spatiality. His earlier existentially oriented account of these relations, with its focus on the dissolution or loosening of the distinction between subjective and objective realms, takes the eidetic form of Husserlian phenomenology critically and turns it to the task of understanding embodied experience in its socially and historically articulated senses. This aspect of his work is promising for and attractive to reflection on perception as pertaining to cultural and political questions. His later work, unsatisfied with the restrictions and ontological implication of the model of consciousness that his earlier work loosens but nevertheless affirms, seeks to make emphatic the singularity of Being in a way that radicalises perception as a form of mutual expressivity structuring of relations between body and world.

Thus, in the following chapter an attempt is made to explore the critical usefulness of the phenomenological discussion of photography conceived in terms of photographic art. Two different photographic practices will be examined in terms of the issues, concepts and models of thought discussed so far in an attempt to 'test out' or further articulate the theoretical value of a phenomenological theory of photography. These practices, roughly speaking, concern themselves with a range of general phenomenological issues and they do so through staging critical relations between photographic registers of the concepts body and world.

CHAPTER THREE

TWO APPROACHES TO A CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC FORM: EMILIO PRINI, PHOTOGRAPHIC IMPOVERISHMENT AND THE CRITIQUE OF AUTONOMOUS ART—ALLAN SEKULA'S 'EXISTENTIAL PROBLEMATIC' AND THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY AS A SOCIAL FORM

Andrew Fisher, *"You'll always be dependant on what you find, on what happens" he said and I thought, "well, is that strictly true"?*, 2005.

The whole marvel of a style already present in the invisible elements of a work thus comes down to the fact that, working in the human world of perceived things, the artist comes to put his stamp upon even the inhuman world revealed by optical instruments—just as the swimmer unknowingly skims over a whole buried universe which would frighten him if he looked at it with undersea goggles. [...] We must therefore recognize that what is designated by the terms glance, hand, and in general body is a system of systems destined for the inspection of a world and capable of leaping over distances, piercing the perceptual future, and outlining hollows and reliefs, distances and deviations—a meaning—in the inconceivable flatness of being.

Merleau-Ponty, Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence

I covered a large portion of a field with a photograph of the field totally adhering to the ground. By the action of the light the photo has progressively worn out; it has been rolled. Due to the action of darkness the portion of grass uncovered appeared white. The worn out photo has been cut and put in a room.

Emilio Prini, *a side of life and a biological key*

PART ONE: EMILIO PRINI, PHOTOGRAPHIC IMPOVERISHMENT AND THE CRITIQUE OF AUTONOMOUS ART

Photography, Art and Use

Emilio Prini has produced a body of artworks over the last four decades using repetitive and improvisatory strategies to modulate treatment of a range of materials and objects according to a loosely systematic procedure. Since the mid-1970s, the central elements of this practice have been a limited number of his own works dating from the late 1960s and earlier 1970s. Many of these, in one way or another, originally involved photography. Yet, neither they, nor the later uses to which they have been put (which lay further emphasis upon photography), can be described as constituting a photographic practice in a conventional manner, not least because photography is only part of his practice.

In this sense his work is clearly similar to many other artists who have made use of photography during the same period. His strategy of re-photographing a limited number of pre-existing elements in black and white and blowing these up to a large scale might now be considered over familiar and thus outmoded. Nonetheless, taken as a whole Prini's practice serves to problematise what has become a familiar term in the critical and historical understanding of such explicitly non-conventional claims to photographic-art; the way they have come to be grouped under the term, "artists using photography".[1] There remains, nevertheless, an unexamined critical function of the relative non-conventionality and even the aura of outmodedness, which colour Prini's practice. One might say that the photographic aspect of his work is promising for a phenomenological theorisation of photography precisely because it demands extension of what would have to be included in analysis as 'photography', what it would need to take account of as being 'art' and, perhaps most importantly, what meanings would have to be attributed to the notion of 'use' as a result.

This is a practice that places an obvious emphasis on phenomenological issues (for instance, scale, spatial arrangement, repetition and an insistent claim on the present of the works' display). As will be seen in what follows, this fact has been foregrounded by those few critics who have written about the otherwise critically and curatorially

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[1] See the quotation from Douglas Fogle's introduction to the exhibition catalogue, *The Last Picture Show: Artists Using Photography 1960-1982*, (in footnote 11 to chapter 2 of this thesis (p. 95)). As a critical term for description of contemporary photographic art practices, "artists using photography" has itself aged. Indeed, one can note a shift in its use as a critical term that is due, I would argue, to the massive success and consequent ubiquity of photography in current art practice. The term was useful initially insofar as it served to separate a range of more or less casual uses of photography from 'conventional' photography and to justify these as art in opposition to aesthetic expectations projected by existing critical discourses of photography in a way that seems simply unnecessary any more. In the interim (as is exemplified by Fogle's use of the term) this phrase seems to have become a sign under which to justify the relativism characterising the distinctly plural historical field of post-1960s photographic art. Thus, to quote from Fogle again: "Whether or not these artists saw themselves primarily as photographers (some did, and many did not), their wide-ranging practices are linked by what at times might seem like an extraphotogrpahic impulse to launch themselves into the world—or, more concretely, into a multiplicity of photographic worlds of their own making" (p. 10).

neglected body of works in which it comprises.[2] Phenomenological themes are, indeed, absolutely central to any critical understanding of this practice. However, their particular character has been subject to significant forms of misrecognition and misunderstanding. In opposition to the stress on the rather too simplistic notion of the phenomenological that characterises such interpretations, I argue that Prini's photographic practice is structured around an attempt to salvage (and to further) the possibility of a critique of artistic autonomy. The results of this endeavour are critically trenchant and phenomenologically intricate. One effect of this orientation is that its particular mode of emphasising photography problematises the all too easy characterisation of photographic temporality as exhausted by its memorialising function

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[2] One can sketch an outline of Prini's exhibition history briefly, which is striking when one considers that it began with an involvement in many exhibitions and events now considered seminal, including the inaugural exhibition of Arte Povera. Though ultimately a banal exercise, listing these exhibitions is the most direct way to show the trajectory of Prini's career. The exhibition catalogue *Ferme in dogana* (Stuck in Customs, Nov. 1995 – Jan. 1996), his only major international solo exhibition at the Ancienne Douane, Musée de la Ville de Strasbourg, (Strasbourg: Éditions les Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg, 1995) and the chronology of events presented by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in *Arte Povera*, (London and New York: Phaidon, 2001) provide the most reliable sources for this history. Both are more comprehensive than the summary presented here. Prini's other solo exhibitions have mostly taken place in smaller galleries of contemporary art and, after the early 1970s, have largely taken place in Rome. In terms of the emphases here his other really significant solo exhibition, *Fermacarte*, took place at the Galleria la Bertesca, Genoa, in 1968.

Prini's participation in group exhibitions includes: *Arte Povera* at the Galleria la Bertesca in 1967, *Rassegna di Arte figurative, Arte Povera – Azioni Povere* at the Arsenali dell Antica Republica, in Amalfi during 1968, *Live in Your Head – When Attitude Becomes Form. Works, Concepts, Processes, Situations, Informations* at the Bern Kunsthalle in 1969, *Information* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1970 and *Italy two, Art around 1970* at the Museum of the Philadelphia Civic Centre in 1973. After these, he does not feature very much in the exhibitions and publications that served to consolidate the international success of other individual Arte Povera artists and the reputation of Arte Povera more generally.

Prini's participation in large-scale exhibitions has a second stage. In a rather ironic parallel (beginning in the 1980s with the reconsideration of Arte Povera as an object of burgeoning historical interest), his inclusion in survey exhibitions occurred alongside the intensification of self-reflexive repetition that came to characterise his practice. A list of these exhibitions includes and might be said to begin with, *Identité itallienne, L'Art en Italie depuis 1959* at the Pompidou Centre in Paris in 1981, and, *Verso l'arte Povera. Aspetti e momenti ugli anni sessanta in Italia* at the Padiglione d'arte contemporanea in Milan in 1988, followed by, *L'art conceptuel, une perspective* at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1990, *Arte Povera, 71 and 20 Jahre danach* in 1991 at the Kunstverein in Munich, and *Arte Povera: Arbeiten und Dokumente aus der Sammlung Goetz, 1958 bis heute*, in 1997, at the Museum Moderner Kunst, Stiftung Ludwig, Wein. Perhaps the most widely known of these exhibitions was, *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972*, organized by the Walker Art Centre and the Tate Modern (and accompanied by the catalogue, *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972*, eds., Richard Flood and Frances Morris, Minneapolis and London: Walker Art Centre and Tate Modern, 2000). One can argue that Prini has made the parallel between his work's logic of repetition and its institutional historicisation quite explicit in the particular ways his contributions to exhibitions and publications present 'old' material reconfigured as 'new' works.

and, as such, this practice presents a critique of the prevalent temporal formalism of much photographic discourse. In light of their problematisation of temporal formalism, one can claim that the artworks in question are understandable in the terms of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology. They are. But if one were to take this suggestion seriously, (i.e., not simply to apply Merleau-Pontian concepts to the works without reflection on the critical problems this might entail) then such an account would raise critical questions that extend beyond the descriptive function phenomenological categories and procedures are often taken to have in contemporary art discourse.

In relation to the present study, (a contemporary attempt to articulate a phenomenology of photographic art) one might claim that Prini's oeuvre occupies a position very much like Cézanne's oeuvre did for Merleau-Ponty. Thinking the relation in this way reveals many similarities and some significant differences that recall the earlier discussion of the relation between Merleau-Ponty and Mel Bochner's photographic works in Chapter 2. In this light, one can say that both Prini and Cézanne pursue the self-appointed task of "expressing what exists" quite intransigently and that they do so in ways oriented to articulating the interminability of such a task as it is marked by an emphasis on the perceptual characteristics of the artworks that result from their activities. There is, of course, a distinctive historical break in the conception of art to be understood as characterising any such possible linkage and it is one that can be understood as pertaining to the mediating philosophical claims of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology when considered in the context of modernist and anti-modernist aesthetics.

Prini's work has been almost entirely shaped by his refusal of the persistent notion that artists embody transcendental creative values that are normatively understood under the name of expression. Indeed, this practice is explicitly organised around the critical

rejection of expression as an aesthetic category, thus: "I have no programme, I grope around, I see no trace of the emergence of art (also not the tragedy) [...] I am, when possible, not creative".[3] Yet the phenomenological emphases of Prini's work, its concern for the relation between Prini's own and the works' history and the way these factors take on form in the photographic representation of his body and a range of other figures, seem nonetheless to be understandable in terms of Merleau-Ponty's notions of expression and style. Arguably, it is as a critically 'expressive' negation of a naïve notion of expression that Prini's treatment of the photographic images of himself and a range of objects and materials are of interest for a contemporary consideration of what they might mean for photographic experience.

Whilst Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne performed a painterly synthesis of spatio-temporality, forging expressive unity from the disjunctive matrix of nature and culture, Prini seems to operate in a world saturated by the technical forms of operational thinking Merleau-Ponty warns of in "Eye and Mind".[4] Prini's negation of expression stages an inversion of the perceptual sense of the world that might be disclosed to a possible community of embodied perceivers such as Merleau-Ponty finds in Cézanne. Thus, in light of Merleau-Ponty's claim: "It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings" (and in view of the historical challenge to the privileging of such art forms that Prini participates in), his project can be seen as an inversion of the meaning of expression. Looking at his works one might read them as indicating that repeatedly, temporarily and contingently he is forced to borrow some

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[3] Emilio Prini, *Ferme in dogana*, Strasbourg: Éditions les Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg, 1995, p. 24.

[4] Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind", p. 123. Recall the threat of operationalism as articulated in this essay and discussed above: "If this kind of thinking were [...] to set out to construct [humanity and history] on the basis of a few abstract indices [...] then, since the human being truly becomes the *manipulandum* he thinks he is, we enter into a cultural regimen in which there is neither truth nor falsehood concerning humanity and history, into a sleep, or nightmare from which there is no awakening", (p. 122).

register of his own body from a world in which the technical determinations of operationalism are in the ascendant. The "marvel of a style" that, for Merleau-Ponty, is already there in the "invisible elements of a work" (those aspects that one completes, those elisions that one's perception makes sense out of and those conventions that such requirements transform) has the character of arising in and through its visibility but its status as a work is attenuated by its extensive and historically contingent form, spread out, to speak, across the achieved flatness of a being for which technical form is integral to embodied perception.

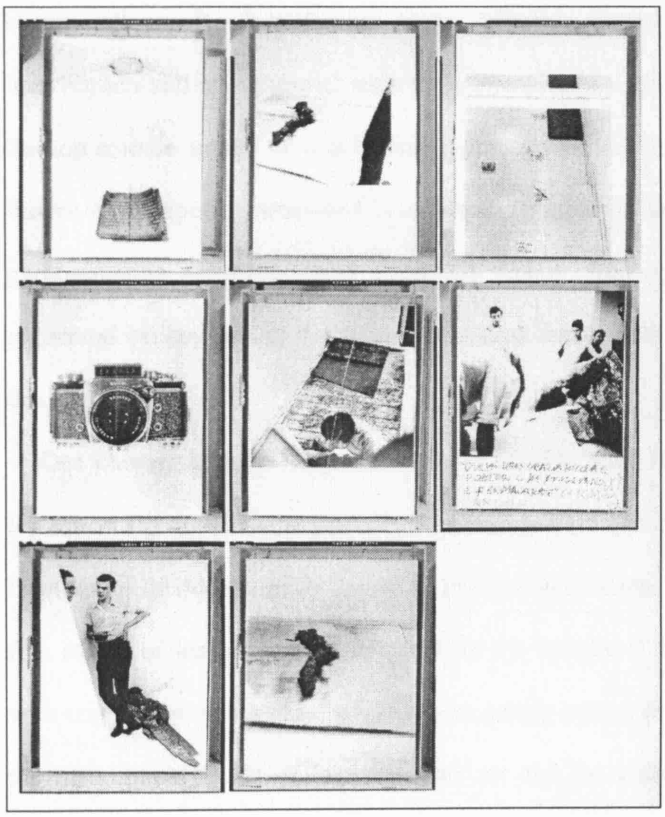

Fig. 6: Emilio Prini, Selections from *Fermacarte*, 1968, (as published in the catalogue for the exhibition, *From Zero to Infinity 1962-1972*, under the title, *Organised States of Necessity*, Tate Modern, 2001)

With these observations in mind, the important introductory point to be made is that a body of artworks of different kinds dating from the late 1960s and early 1970s have,

latterly, been photographically reproduced, used and re-used. One can remark that the practice in which these works are embedded has become both increasingly reductive and increasingly complex (see fig. 6 for a recent example of one form it has taken). 'Complex but reductive' is not a bad, informal, initial characterisation of the works in question as, whilst they have been multiplied and varied the differences introduced have found their register in the same site, the surfaces of the photographic objects thus produced. For instance, figure 6 shows a range of images that comprise, arguably, the core of this practice. These have been subjected to multiple processes and revisions that mark their material form as being quite obscure insofar as they do represent 'original' events whilst also introducing many different, interposed moments or stages of intervention and disruption of such representation (see the 'bleached out' appearance of the top middle image of a previous 'performance' event, for instance or the various modes of cropping, interposed blanks and changes to images in the printing and re-photographing processes used in fig. 6). These more or less subtle changes can be registered by comparing the images repeated throughout all of the figures illustrating this section.

One photograph depicting *Perimeter in Lead* (a work from 1967, pictured in 1995 at top left in fig. 6) has been reproduced many times since, in ways that have distanced it from its initial documentary function. In its original form, *Perimeter in Lead* comprised five stacks of lead sheeting, measured to the weight of Prini's writing arm, inscribed with text and placed around an otherwise empty gallery to stand as an intervention into the institutional space of contemporary art and the audience's experience of it. The material presence of the piled lead sheets emphasised certain kinds of perceptual engagement that tend normatively to be explained in terms of immediacy, whilst the text inscribed upon them disrupted this by providing a fragmented and self-reflexive

commentary upon the generic conditions of the work's viewing. (See fig. 8 for another use to which this image has been put and fig. 7, for an unusually straightforward document of its original form as reconstructed in 1995.)

Fig. 7: Emilio Prini, *Perimetro di piombo* (Perimeter in Lead), 1967, (as shown in the Musée de la Ville, Strasbourg, in the exhibition *Ferme in dogana* (Stuck in Customs), 1995).

In its later photographic forms a range of other effects—such as the gradual dissolution of detail into coarse granulation, consequent upon a combination of re-photographing and transformations of scale, as well as its combination with different images and objects—have largely displaced *Perimeter in Lead's* original mediation of relations between materiality, institutional context and spectatorship onto the specific qualities of certain processes of photographic reproduction. The questions of perceptual experience projected and problematised by the singular, albeit formally attenuated, original have come to be the thematic concern of its multiple photographic reiteration.

One might assume this means that what was once 'spatial' has become 'temporal'. However, the continuing emphasis on specific forms of materiality, scale, placement, institutional context and combination with other objects and images, (not to mention the fact that these are always improvised in response to a particular institutional site) militates against such ways of understanding the work. At the very least, space and time

as conceptual categories and as experiential conditions are revealed as being set in rather complex relation to each other and the predominant register of these spatio-temporal relations is to be found in (or on) the surfaces of the photographic ensembles thus produced.

Fig. 8: Emilio Prini, *Fermacarte 1968 Presse Papier 1995 (Strasbourg Ill et Rhin)*, in *Ferme in dogana*, Strasbourg, 1995.

The temporal logic of this practice is neither simple (i.e., it is not thinkable as a unidirectional development) nor is it overly formalised (say, it is not understandable as pure repetition or as a kind of temporal *poesis*). On the one hand, though it does unfold its concern for the past over a determinate period of time and in specific locations, it is not a form of reproduction that remains legible in terms of antecedents and their consequents. On the other hand, though its spatio-temporal form is structured by a principle of repetition it nevertheless resists overly formal interpretations of this

category as a pure or abstract transcendental condition. Indeed, its mediate form, or status, in-between these conceptual poles suggests an analogy to the ambiguous character of perception as a problem in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception as an embodied system of sensible organisation.

The Historical Temporality of "Unexpected Space"

As is well documented, Prini was one of the six artists selected by Germano Celant to participate in the exhibition that launched Arte Povera: *Arte Povera e Im Spazio* at the Galleria La Bertesca, Genoa in 1967. Celant's celebrated introduction to the catalogue for this exhibition ends with a brief discussion of Prini's contribution to this show.

> Prini's space can and must materialise everywhere and unexpectedly. Space becomes at once the stage and the auditorium. All attention is directed towards the optical-acoustical rhythm. The image and the sound element work parallel to the formulation of space. Control passes to the spatial whole. The victim designated for sacrifice is the optical + aural observer. And touch? Corporeality of material and gesture, which are always real and palpable in others, are brought into relation with our own bodies. And with this we reach the real terrain of Arte Povera.[5]

The existential characteristic of this "unexpected space" that either *must* or *should* arise and *elaborate* or *formulate* itself *everywhere* and *abruptly* (and, I would add, as a

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[5] Germano Celant, *Arte Povera - e Im Spazio*, Genoa: La Bertesca, Masnata, Trentalance, 1967. Republished in *Arte Povera / Art Povera*, ed. Germano Celant, Milan: Electra, 1985, pp. 30-3. By way of redeeming Prini from the obscurity into which his work later fell, the few critical discussions of it in publication conventionally remark that it was with this reference to Prini that Celant first published the term Arte Povera. This occurrence has become something of an item of faith, as if Prini is privileged by this textual proximity to Celant at the 'birth' of Arte Povera. This entails ignoring the quite conventionally overdetermined rhetorical character of the catalogue essay as a genre. One familiar formal function of this genre is to justify the organisational logic of the exhibition in question and Celant's text is typical in this respect. It lists and attempts to cement relations between diverse practices and ends up, hyperbolically, with these comments on Prini. It should be borne in mind that the characteristics attributed to Prini's works are, inferentially, also attributed to the other artists listed as when Celant states, "and with this we reach the real terrain of Arte Povera", he generalises from Prini to force an allusion to the 'proper' concern of the rhetorically synthesising term, Arte Povera. (The *Kurzfurher* to the later Documenta X exhibition presents a different translation of this passage: "In his [Prini's] work, space *can and should arise everywhere and abruptly.* It becomes both the stage and the surrounding theatre. Attention focuses on the optical-acoustic rhythm. The image and sound element work *in parallel to the spatial elaboration.*" [my emphases], p. 190).

generic claim) are thematised in another statement Celant makes in the same text: "physical presence and behaviour have become art".[6]

These passages posit 'behaviour' as an attribute of objects as much as subjects and, conversely, they assert that the inanimacy attributable to what might have mere 'physical presence' is not restricted to objects and materials; things exhibit behaviours and the people that perceive them take on a share of their inhumanity. Furthermore, the artwork functions to provoke this ambiguous relation and it does so by modulating the sense of the environment in which such relations take place. These observations draw attention to the (art historically) familiar sense in which existentialist and phenomenological ideas were important in the development of Arte Povera and 1960s Italian counter-culture more generally.[7] In this context, it is important to stress that the

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[6] Ibid. This set of claims gives a clue to what the "real terrain of Arte Povera" might mean. One might say that it does not simply indicate a critically expanded notion of artistic material, nor is it definable as a special case of institutional critique or even as a specific critical mode of address to conventions of aesthetic experience. Rather, it appears here to be characterisable as an extensive claim on the co-location of all three of these notions, (and these notions are usually taken to define what Arte Povera means in historical and aesthetic terms and with more or less weight placed on one or other of them).

[7] One of the historical factors that makes Arte Povera difficult to pin down as a movement is that the widely shared concern to challenge existing conventions of art making (and the forms of experience these anticipated or were taken to structure) was often critically oriented towards, or suffused with, different and markedly political and social imperatives and performed in the interests of establishing radically "open-ended" cultural practices. One of the interesting things about the work of Prini, in particular, in this context is that it does not fit easily into what has become an all too strict division between the modernist claims of earlier practices and those works and movements produced in reaction to them, such as minimalism, post-minimalism and conceptual art. This division can be thought of as structured around the insistence on the formal characteristics of the experience generated by the art object, generally through the assertion of forms of abstraction, on the one hand, and the attempted dissolution of the materially consistent and normative construction of the artwork, on the other. Critical-historical distinctions between minimalist and modernist sculpture and arguments over the relative critical value of the notions of presence and experience they project have come to shape understanding of these practices in art historical discourse. Alex Alberro recently described this divide in the context of a discussion of Dan Graham's *Schema* of 1966 in a way that is apposite here:

> The impact of an art that foregrounds the "space of the room itself [as] a structuring factor" was decisive in numerous ways. For one thing, it shifted the focus away from the Modernist "truth to materials" and "essence of the medium" toward a concern for the normative limits of art. For another thing, it undermined the prestige of the autonomous or self-referential art object that had been so crucial for much Modernism and drew attention to the contingency of the work in real space. Moreover, it made largely redundant the more recent theorisations of Modernism such as Fried's call for an art that possessed "presentness" [...] and it laid bare the function of a work's material support.

Alex Alberro, "Content, Context, and Conceptual Art: Dan Graham's Schema (March 1966)", in *Conceptual Art: Theory, Myth, and Practice*, ed. Michael Corris, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 57. Broadly conceived conceptual works, on this description, questioned the idea of art experience in a move away from the " universality of a phenomenological model to the specificity of a

'medium' of this ambiguous co-location or compresence is the setting provoked by an attempt to critically transform generically characterised but specific instances of institutional 'art space' and the modes of embodied behaviour or comportment that it might structure. Existentialist and phenomenological themes in this context served (at least in Prini's work, if not for Arte Povera more generally) to facilitate conceptually oriented and distinctly critical forms of cultural practice.

Celant's discussion of Prini provides a good example of such existential and phenomenological emphases in early Arte Povera. The specific works to which he refers are *Perimeter in Air* and *Perimeter in Lead* (both of 1967). The former comprised five illuminated coils of neon light placed one in each corner and one in the middle of the gallery space. These switched on and off automatically and in series, reportedly producing a rather grating sound as well as alternating moments of stark illumination and thus filling the space of their display with rhythmic and aggressive noise and light. Thus, one might make sense of the dissolution between perceiving entities and cultural artefacts here as a form of critique focussed on the institutional structuring of aesthetic experience.

As described above, *Perimeter in Lead* comprised five stacks of lead sheeting laid out on the floor, with one in the centre and one in each corner of the room. Each sheet was inscribed using a heading tool with part of a text, which addressed the "aural-optical" experience of generic contemporary gallery space (figs. 6, 7 & 8).[8] In order to

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structuralist model of visual experience". In Italy such critical shifts were enacted in ways that supported other approaches to the interrogation and questioning of the phenomenological bases of the relation between viewer and work. In short, in much Arte Povera work phenomenological themes that were dismissed more stringently and formally elsewhere persisted in ambiguous forms that are resistant to art historical simplification.

[8] A heading tool is a replaceable cutting part in machines designed to inscribe various hard materials and specialist versions are employed by printers in different processes of reproduction. Prini uses them to inscribe lead with text. The relation between the relative softness and the dense weightiness of lead are important. His ability to inscribe the sheet form of this most familiar of Arte Povera materials by hand in this way (using a part from a mechanised system for inscription of harder materials) is more often than

follow the disjointed narrative thus presented, the audience had to go from one pile to another, reading as they went an elliptical account of the kind of space they moved within. There was no indication of order or precedence between the stacks and—as all of the sheets were inscribed with part of the text—much of it remained invisible, hidden under the sheet on top of each stack. Here, one can note that the ambiguous relations staged between things and spectators are mediated by the emphatically material treatment of these textual elements. Already rather complex as an intervention into art space, the photographs of *Perimeter in Lead* became material for re-use in a way that compounds their complexity and renders it flat and obvious. Given the consequent complexity of its mediation of embodiment, materiality and text (and thus of specific extended spatio-temporal relations), one should not limit its phenomenological analysis to an attempted description of the now constitutively distant installation event nor only to the obscure form of representational object produced through its constant re-photographing.

Another important consideration comes into view when recalls that the obscurity into which Prini's works later fell has meant that a few texts (like the celebrated passage from Celant's catalogue essay) came to be the major form in which these works were internationally disseminated and found some kind of social existence. Drawing attention to this fact foregrounds the way in which such apparently 'secondary' considerations came to be taken up into the later form of Prini's practice (and, as will be seen later, Prini's relation to Celant, specifically, figures large in the development of this aspect of his practice). One can think of this now through reflection on Celant's description of the environments constructed by Prini's early work as a claim on "unexpected space". Such

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not arbitrarily linked to the weight of his writing arm and sometimes his whole body as the measure that determines the amount of lead to be used.

an emphasis on space as a temporalised existential challenge to the norms of conventional art space has to be considered, with hindsight, as having become dated. The kind of intervention in question is now a shade of its former radical form. It is a gesture towards an entirely to be expected form of the "unexpected" character of such spaces (i.e., it is a challenge to expectations that has become historically circumscribed). I dwell on this as, one can understand the intransigent and eccentric turn to photographic repetition in Prini's practice as a self-reflexive engagement with the critical value and aesthetic possibilities of the abiding historical value of the unexpected as a degraded figure of radical aesthetic critique. One can summarise this by saying that this is a practice, which thinks the historical temporality of unexpected space as a degraded spatio-temporal form, but that does so as a claim on the contemporary possibility of a radical aesthetic critique. Space here is a perceptual and institutional figure structured historically and socially as a concern for the relation between past, present and future modes of temporality. In order to characterise, evaluate and understand what this critical description might mean one would have to concentrate on the forms of temporality articulated throughout this practice, as these are made emphatic in every instance of the works' repetition.

The Improvised Institution of Photographic Spatio-temporality

In what little critically sophisticated writing that does exist on Prini, the improvisatory and temporary character of his exhibition practice is generally emphasised. This encourages interpretation of his work as comprising a formal claim on the temporal character of authentic aesthetic experience. For instance, in a recent paper, "Playing in the Continuous Present: Richard Long and Emilio Prini", Joy Sleeman gives an account of the transitive, verb-like, temporariness of each instance of the work's

restaging, concluding that: "For Prini, the work is an event in the first person; an event that cannot be documented, and only exists in the present and its immediate apprehension".[9] There are two related things to say about this. Firstly, that it foregrounds a paradox, as much of the work has contained (or comprised almost totally in, see fig. 9) significant amounts of highly mediated photographic documentation of previous events and exhibitions. Secondly, to Sleeman's partial account of the work's temporality one should add that it is through this "undocumentable" insistence on documentation that a series of highly attenuated figures (Prini's body and the body of a camera, for instance) emerge as central critical problems.

Fig. 9: Emilio Prini, *Ferme in dogana* (Stuck in Customs), Strasbourg, (Nov. 1995 – Jan. 1996)

[9] Joy Sleeman, "Playing in the Continuous Present: Richard Long and Emilio Prini", (an, as yet, unpublished conference paper, which Sleeman kindly copied to me). It must be said that the focus of this paper is not entirely on Prini. Sleeman deals with issues of the temporal complications of his work through comparison to that of Richard Long and their mutual contribution to *Rassegna di Arte figurative, Arte Povera – Azioni Povere* at the Arsenali dell Antica Republica, in Amalfi during 1968, (unpaginated manuscript).

Sleeman is by no means mistaken, however, to stress the claim on immediacy here. It remains a core concern, but is only ever asserted problematically. This is not to say that 'the work' exists somehow objectively outside of its display. Prini is careful to avoid this possibility. Rather, it is to claim the opposite, in the form of a critical problem that bears upon the spatio-temporal character of the perceptual experiences the works anticipate. Some of the photographic processes involved have meant, for example, that previous instances of the formation of specific works or elements persist in the images but in degraded form. Prior claims on immediacy have a literal after life in the present claim on immediacy, as they are sedimented quite literally in the material fabric of the more recent acts of reproduction and display (which, according to the logic of repetition, would also have to have been staged as stringent claims on a prior instance of immediate experience). The major implication here is that the form of temporality structuring these works is intrinsically and concretely intersubjective *and* institutional. Its insistent claim on immediacy always mediates a similar prior claim that was directed to others and that took place elsewhere. These prior instances, other people and different places were concrete (their documents persist), but at the moment of each new instantiated claim this concreteness becomes ambiguous as a perceptual figure that is paradoxically presented as a heavily mediated, past occurrence. The mode of intersubjectivity thus projected is institutionally and subjectively concrete (at least at some minimal level) but *as* a claim on perceptual immanence. Sleeman's attempt to account for the labile temporality of this practice through the metaphoric structure of the transitive verb form does not take account of the concrete registers of these pluralized intersubjective and institutional factors.

This account suggests the following articulation of the work's temporality. Immediate apprehension is thematised but not as the result of the acts of any

constituting subject (even one who thinks of their immediate experience as being temporary and unstable). Rather, this constitutive privilege is foregrounded and articulated as what I would call the institutional character of the range of anonymous and generalised subjects involved as these are mediated by the improvisatory character of the temporal claims of each consecutive stage of the work.

I take this to describe important aspects of the spatio-temporal relations articulated in Prini's use of photography. But, as a description, it remains rather formal. One can recall here, the critical discussion of Husserl's eidetic account of internal time consciousness and its relation to Barthes theorisation of photographic experience. The formal character of the modalities of temporalising perception as it reaches out to constitute the objects of experience encourages an emphasis on a purely form of essence. However, any account of photographic experience as entwined with a critical notion of art (in Prini's practice) would need to account for the range of figures that are modulated by the process of repetition and that confront the viewer in the temporally complex and materially mediated terms outlined above. In this light one might make appeal to the Merleau-Pontian concept of institution in an attempt to characterise the existential modalities involved.

Institution is a concept through which Merleau-Ponty attempts to articulate his earlier account of perception and consciousness in terms of the social and historical but ontologically labile form of intersubjective relations. With the idea of institution, the subject is no longer thought of as constituting itself in the process of the act of forming objects in the encounter with things and others. Rather, subjectivities participate in a common world that has the character of sets of productive processes: the "instituting" of meaning, or abiding 'senses'. Thus:

> If the subject were taken not as a constituting but as an instituting subject, it might be understood that the subject does not exist instantaneously and that the other person does not exist simply as a negative of myself. [...] Thus

> the instituted subject exists between others and myself, between me and myself, like a hinge, the consequence and the guarantee of our belonging to a common world. Thus what we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning, will form an intelligible series or a history—or again those events which sediment in me a meaning, not just as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future.[10]

Here one should recall the discussion of Ketty La Rocca articulated above in terms of a photographic mediation of specific forms of ambiguous perceptual embodiment. The question of relations between the tactile and the visual is shifted onto the level of the socially articulated reversibility of intersubjective relations.

I take this articulation of the concept of instituting subjectivity to describe the relation between time, space, media and perception as staged in Prini's works. What is interesting about this claim is that, in terms of the claims on perceptual experience they make, formal distinctions between the inanimate and animate, objective and subjective and, indeed, the human and inhuman tend to dissolve and that they do so in a particular manner. The form of subjective experience (at the level of its perceptual acts) here includes the sedimented and generalised social subject of cultural production as an integral element of its perceptual possibility. It is significant in this context that Sleeman does not address the manner in which the phenomenological conditions set by the work's installation are articulated through the relationships set up between distinct

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[10] Ibid., pp. 40-1. Albert Rabil gives a very good summary of what is at stake in Merleau-Ponty's notion of "institution" in his 1967 study, *Merleau-Ponty: Existentialist of the Social World*, New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967, pp. 156-7.

> In his course lectures at the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty developed the notion if "institution" as a means of describing the social world in its various forms. In his inaugural lecture he had already defined an institution as 'a symbolic system that the subject takes over and incorporates as a style of functioning, as a global configuration, without having any need to conceive it at all'. In his course he broadens the idea to include not only the sedimentation of the past but also the renewal of meaning in the present. In this broader context, institutions possess three characteristics. First, they designate a movement from the subject to his world and from the world to the subject; neither can be taken in isolation. Institutions are *relational* concepts. Second, they point both to the unity of human experience and to the multiplicity of perspectives possible without any context. And third, they indicate the necessity of a dialectical understanding of the relationship between the given and the novel in experience.
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> Ibid., p. 156.

'moments' of immediacy and mediation. What her account does reveal is that *what it is* that makes the claim on immediate experience and its mode of doing so, are by no means simply characterisable as immediate. These observations complicate, considerably, any claim on the character of an implied present that gives meaning to the transitive characterisation of any first person assertion regarding the work's temporariness and contingency. This is one of the most consistently misrecognised aspects of Prini's practice. The problem can be clarified by considering the following description.

> The elements of the material he shows are never more than the 'leftovers' of a transient relation fixed for a brief moment in an object. [...] Each of his shows consists of a 'repeat' (often including a reconstruction) of a previous work. Exhibited and re-exhibited over the years, Prini's works are always already replayed according to the new situation with which he is confronted. Repetition, for him, is something on the order of resurgence, sharing the infinite dispersion of a poetic space otherwise resistant to the constraints of historicising.[11]

The figures of the infinite and poeticised space are an unwarranted abstraction, though they do, in their formality come close to describing something of what is at stake. Just after the passage quoted here, the discussion turns to consideration of a work entitled *L'ho gettato dalla finestra, Pozze di colore* ("I have thrown it from the window, Pools [or puddles] of colour", made and remade in 1968, 1973 and 1995), which seems to be constructed according to an 'anti-historical' *poesis* of naked repetition.[12] *L'ho gettato dalla finestra* comprises in a sheet of lead, painted grey and thrown from a gallery window to land on the green felt of an open vitrine positioned in the street underneath. The vitrine's lid is then closed and the whole is moved into the gallery to be shown containing the metal, left in the shape it took on impact. Repetition and change are determining here, but so too is a heavily circumscribed notion of chance, which is how these take on material form. I would argue that this particular stress on temporality,

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[11] Documenta X, *Kurzfurher*, p. 190.

[12] In the current context *poesis* can be defined as the essential form of making in the sense that underlies aesthetic theories of the form of temporal unfolding that would characterise, for instance, the experience of hearing a poem recited.

with its character as a claim on the mutability of materials and the transitive character of display, remains limited and rather formalistic in its attempt to problematise the relations of immediacy and mediation, and reflections on contingency and necessity, that delimit *L'ho gettato dalla finestra's* temporal structure and determine its form as an artwork. Whether this judgement is taken to hold true or not, it serves to indicate that the situation is markedly different when one considers Prini's repetitious use of photographs. These, by contrast, seem unable to help making emphatic the specifically historicized relations between the different moments and contexts of their realisation as "new" instances of that, which is resurgent. However, what might be considered the 'normal' historical relations revealed by photographic representation in the context are rendered obscure. The significance of this implication becomes clear when Prini is considered in relation to historical understanding of Are Povera more generally. The general existential emphasis of these repeated, enigmatic mediations of perceptual immanence does direct one to think of these works in terms of abstract temporal repetition (perhaps, in terms of an external form of agency determining photographic experience). However, the insistent descriptive elements that carry over into repetition the documentary marks of a markedly critical artistic project remain insistent and demand a less formal description.

Emilio Prini, Arte Povera and "Radical Impoverishment"

The period over which Prini's practice has unfolded its reiterative logic is the same time span during which the notion of what was radical in the art of the late 1960s has,

arguably, been established as a conventional, formal framework for defining the contemporaneity of art, as such.[13]

To date, Prini continues to assert the radicality of his commitment to a concept of "the impoverished" and he does so, explicitly, in critical relation to Arte Povera as such.[14] His own obscurity looms large in this somewhat paranoid self-assertion, making its fragility as a claim to authenticity, itself, interesting. Given the particular form of repetition this has taken what might have been "radical" in his practice of the late 1960's is now, literally, incorporated into a practice that threatens at every turn to dissolve into nostalgia. The question is: How does his claim to a radical concept of the "impoverished" operate in the context of the works' marked institutional invisibility, especially considering its structurally intense problematisation of the conditions of what visibility it has attained?

Just what the name Arte Povera refers to is famously difficult to specify, to the extent that this same observation has become the staple form of introductions to most discussions of it.[15] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's introduction to an historical description of Arte Povera captures something of its complexity.

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[13] On this point see, Peter Osborne's comments (made with regard to Conceptual art, but applicable to the "post-conceptual" character of subsequent practices) in his introductory survey to *Conceptual Art*, London and New York: Phaidon, 2002, especially p. 18. Paul Wood makes a similar point, almost simultaneous with Osborne's in his, *Conceptual Art*, London: Tate Publications, 2002pp. 10-17. A discussion of similar themes from the point of view of the art historical treatment of issues of medium specificity is given in, Alex Potts, "Tactility: The Interrogation of Medium in Art of the 1960s, *Art History*, vol. 27, no. 2, April 2004, pp. 283-304.

[14] Interview with Emilio Prini, Modena, Italy, May 2002.

[15] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev's survey essay in *Arte Povera*, pp. 14-47, offers a wide-ranging account of the emergence of Arte Povera, its main protagonists and cultural context. Also of note is Nike Bätzner's account of the same in, "Arte Povera: Materialkonzepte und Ideenprozesse", in the exhibition catalogue *La Poetica dell' Arte Povera*, (Kunstmuseum Kloster Unser Lieben Frauen, Magdeburg, 2003), ed. Annegret Laabs, Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2003, pp. 12-20. Further discussion of the cultural context out of which Arte Povera emerged (useful as a slightly different list of events rather than for its commentary) can be found in, Luciano Caramel, "Towards the Seventies (Beyond the Sixties)", in *Arte in Italia Negli Anni '70: Verson I Settanta (1968-1970)*, Milan: Edizioni Charta, 1996, pp. 25-39. For a discussion of such developments focussing on the relationships established between Italian and American artists in Turin specifically see Mirella Bandini's slight but informative diaristic recollection "Turin in the 1970s: Fiat, Arte Povera, and Other Heroes", *Flash Art*, no. 160, October 1991, pp. 104-09.

> In the late 1960s a number of Italian artists working primarily in Turin and Rome, as well as Genoa, Milan and Bologna, began to show their work together. Resolutely avoiding a signature style and encouraging incoherence as a positive value, these artists produced work spanning sculpture, photography, installation and performance, which they showed alongside that of other international artists involved in parallel tendencies such as Land Art, antiform, postminimalism and Conceptual Art. Those artists who were to become most closely associated with this movement [...] were concerned with that point at which art and life, nature and culture, intersect. They attempted to create a subjective understanding of matter and space allowing for an experience of the 'primary' energy present in all aspects of life as lived directly and not mediated through representation, ideology or codified languages. This energy was intended, on the one hand, to correspond to the basic physical forces of nature (such as gravity or electricity) and, on the other hand, to refer to the fundamental elements of human nature (such as vitality, memory and emotion).[16]

One of the values of this description is that it indicates the heterogeneous matrix of ideas, social and cultural commitments and, often contradictory, critical and aesthetic claims on both tradition and contemporaneous cultural issues that colour discussion of Arte Povera. As Christov-Bakargiev has it: "So pluralistic are its manifestations and manifold its concerns that even today, more than thirty years after the initial surge of creativity, it is difficult to define Arte Povera". Yet, even in this demonstration of the heterogeneity of Arte Povera the impulse is to assert the notion of creativity as determining. As noted above, Prini's entire project stands as a critical rejection of this category. Perhaps it would be most accurate to say that Arte Povera is a constitutively ambiguous historical phenomenon.[17] In light of this, Prini's historically epiphenomenal

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[16] Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1999, p. 16.

[17] Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, p. 18. In this context, on the one hand, one might want to stress the ways in which much that counts as Arte Povera maintained a connection to modes of anarchist, socialist and Marxist thought (for instance, as a range of rejections of consumer culture, or in some cases, as an attempt to dissolve aesthetic practice into political activism). On the other hand, it would appear necessary to remark the senses in which much of Arte Povera also bears intimate relation to modes of qausi-theological vitalism and comprises in rather florid expressions of *Lebensphilosophie* (the sense in which certain aspects can be situated as part of the intellectual heritage of Jung, for example, or the ubiquity of vague conceptions of that which connects matter and humanity in nature as a universally vital and culturally appropriable "energy"). This ambiguity is difficult to overcome and remains one the most distinctive aspects of Arte Povera when it is considered in general terms. As a name for a visual art movement or broader cultural phenomenon and as descriptive of an approach to art making through critical expansion of the materials of art, it is ambiguous in a number of respects. As descriptive of the Italian version of wider cultural tendencies in the late 1960s and early 1970s, its range of reference and critical usefulness remain contested. Yet, the term also has an effectively agreed practical and institutional sense insofar as it is primarily used to describe a geographically locatable and historically specifiable moment of fairly recent (and arguably contemporary) art practice. One might be encouraged to think of Arte Povera in this usage as identifying a rather heterogeneous group of artists, gathered together, perhaps, predominantly in the interests of establishing the career of its major promoter, Germano Celant which then gained a force of its own as a name.[17] Alternatively, one might think of it as a specific, radical and diverse, counter-cultural reaction to the apparently stultifying, largely private and conservative

claims on the concept of poverty obviously coincide with the development of Arte Povera and yet they do so in a self-consciously critical manner, which places the notion of the creative at the centre of his practice in a problematic and critically interesting fashion.[18] Prini's eccentric position in this sphere is distinctive and has, I would argue, meant that his practice has come to concentrate on a categorial refinement of impoverishment as its organising principle and as a means of addressing the problem of creativity that haunts critical discourse on Arte Povera.[19]

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gallery culture obtaining in Italy during the earlier 1960s, which amongst its other ambitions as a counter-culture sought to dissolve disciplinary separations between the roles of artist and critic.

[18] For a general overview of the historical context see, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Italian Culture*, eds., Zygmunt G. Barański and Rebecca J. West, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, especially Eugenia Paulicalla's, "Art in modern Italy: from the Macchioli to the Transavantgardia" pp. 243-264, David Ward, "Intellectuals, culture and power in modern Italy", pp. 81-96, and Sharon Wood and Joseph Farrel, "Other voices: contesting the status quo", pp. 131-150. For a brief discussion of one important aspect of the Italian political situation see Umberto Eco, "The Death of Gruppo 63", in *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni, Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989, pp. 236-250. An interesting discussion of the parallel development of a post-Heideggerean concept of "weak thought" in Italian philosophical discourse over the period since the 1960s can be found in Giovanna Borradori, "'Weak Thought' and Postmodernism: The Italian Departure from Deconstruction", *Social Text*, no. 18, Winter 1987-88, pp. 39-49. In obliquely related terms that are specific to photography and art in the broader European context see, "Alternative Pictures: Conceptual Art and the Artistic Emancipation of Photography in Europe" by Stefan Gronert, in *The Last Picture Show*, pp. 86-96, though this essay focuses almost entirely on the use of photography by northern European artists.

[19] Its ambiguities are resonant in the way Arte Povera has latterly become a contentious object of historical concern. In this vein, one can note Piero Gilardi's "Open Letter to Germano Celant", written on the occasion of the exhibition, *From Zero to Infinity*, in 2001, ("Open Letter to Germano Celant", originally published in *Juliet Art Magazine*, no. 103, May/June 2001, republished in German translation as, "Offener Brief an Germano Celant", in *La Poetica dell' Arte Povera,* pp. 21-23. Its translation into English here is my own). In this letter, Gilardi reminds Celant about how his early writings had seemed to, "capture precisely [...] the restlessness, the issues and the contradictions of those times around the middle of the 1960s", and of the ways in which their conversations at that time focussed on notions of "anti-art". Gilardi also remembers how Arte Povera, "confronted everything that was expected from us as proof of an artistic activity" and that Celant was, indeed, instrumental in "training a group of artists to an international level of aesthetic and theoretical readiness". He goes on, however, to ask, "what remains [of this shared] experience today" and he does so in light of the judgement: "Without doubt the diverse and widely scattered creative work of the 1970s has, meanwhile, been carried over into the redundant aesthetic of an extreme, consumption oriented culture". (In German, this last reads: "Ohne Zweifel ist die vielfältige und breit gestreute kreative Arbeit der siebziger Jahre mittlerweile in die redundante Ästhetik einer extrem konsumorientierten Kultur übertragen worden", p. 23.) Here, Gilardi indicates an important difference in the forms taken by the same practices and objects at different times and, crucially, by doing so he implies a shift in the forms of subjective social agency that he takes to characterise the difference between the 1960s & early 1970s and the time of his writing. This distance is indicated in the contrasting clauses of the last sentence quoted here. In the first of these, heterogeneity is a figure of "openness" and has an egalitarian resonance that characterises this "diverse and widely scattered" period of cultural activity as having been "creative" (i.e., as having been open to diverse possibilities in a broad sense of, more or less convincing, cultural experimentation in the face of socially pressing themes and questions). In the latter clause, the institutional preparation of Arte Povera for display as a set of historical objects involves its institutional 'taking up' in order to pass it on to later generations, but unfortunately, this

In critical writings on Arte Povera, when Prini is mentioned, his works are often described as being "the most conceptual" of those produced by associated artists.[20] Such descriptions refer to the fact that the works in question took a range of different forms, notably: performances and actions made according to predetermined plans; the assertion of textual fragments as what he calls "hypotheses of action"; a range of appropriated "ordinary" materials and objects as well as different uses of photography. All of these tended not to be realised as discreet and durable objects. In short, the term conceptual, here, is given the function of indicating that Prini's earlier practice was made up of diverse, strategically determined and often distinctly critical, approaches to the possible materials and forms of what could count as an artwork. Such use of the term conceptual in this context tends to blur a number of key distinctions that characterise this practice and I take it to be rather clumsy shorthand for a critique of autonomous art.

Prini's work of the late 1960s and early 1970s participated in (manifold and widespread) contemporaneous attempts to challenge the social and institutional autonomy of art as such and as a range of specific assaults on the objective

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occurs at the price its transliteration into the homogenised form of the commodity. Gilardi's view is that Arte Povera, as a historical object and as a contemporary concern for critical and curatorial practice, still entails a conceptual challenge to the institutions of art and even a political challenge to art's social meaning. He thinks that, as such, it offers a critical possibility that could be viable and ongoing. His letter represents something true about the fate of Arte Povera in general and this is an insight that is not, unfortunately, significantly challenged by the fact that it describes a fate that many of the artworks in question actively anticipated more or less explicitly. Given the ambiguous historical and critical status of Arte Povera—and in light of Gilardi's broadening of the question of what it might mean to evaluate its promise for contemporary practice—perhaps a better approach to thinking the meaning of its central term, poverty, would be to view it in terms of this appreciation of its historical generality through the prism of a particular set of claims upon it.

[20] See, for example, Corinna Criticos' brief discussion of Prini in relation to the "more intuitive" emphasis in the work of other Arte Povera artists, (such as Giovanni Anselmo) as in her comment: "Prini's conceptual tendency, which often hindered him from giving form to actual works, is the main reason for his relatively few solo exhibitions. Although represented by Galleria Sperone in the late 1960s, he never had a solo show there", "Reading Arte Povera", in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera, 1962-1972*, p. 88. Alternatively, one could look to Robert Lumley's description of Prini's work, "Impeded Mobility: Emilio Prini" in, *Arte Povera*, London: Tate Publishing, 2004, pp. 41-2. Whilst his comments on Prini are brief, and made in the context of an explicitly introductory text published for non-specialists, Lumley provides one of the most sensitive descriptions of Prini's work in publication.

characteristics taken to define singular autonomous artworks.[21] These notions and the challenges presented to them in this context are intimately intertwined. The relation under critique can be defined, generally, as that identity attributed to the artwork—taken to be an object standing in its own right and articulating the terms of its own justification—which embodies these, ultimately, social facts as presumptive formal-ontological conditions. Whether thought of formally or socially, these conditions derive from the separation of the work and its author and serve to structure any claim on the artwork's singular status vis-à-vis more general values and meanings.

In light of this definition, one can note that some performances/events staged by Prini sought to dissolve existing distinctions between artist, institution and audience in ways that exemplify the critique of autonomy from the side of the generality of autonomous art, so to speak. As, for instance, in one work that entailed a number of people being invited to sit in tents erected over holes that were dug in the ground in front of a range of art gallery entrances.[22] Alternatively, the assertion of his own and others' varied statements as art, comprises another mode of such critique; one that passes from the side of the autonomy of the art object to critique autonomy as such. Listed, these statements read as including apparent descriptions of achieved, projected, possible and "impossible" art objects or events, which are mixed up with and mostly indistinguishable from, descriptions of everyday actions and banal and extraordinary reflections.[23]

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[21] For a general discussion of the period see, Anne Rorimer, *New Art in the 60s and 70s: Redefining Reality*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2001, and, Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2004.

[22] The work referred to here is *Camping [Amsterdam]*, which comprised a complex outdoor event and a display of photographs in the exhibition *Op losse schroeven: situaties en cryptostructuren* (On Loose Screws), at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 1969.

[23] See, for instance, *lato di vita chiave biologica* (a side of life and biological key), in *Art Povera Conceptual, Actual or Impossible Art?*, pp. 211-8, (translated and reproduced here as Appendix 1, pp.). Note, especially, the list of 30 fragmentary statements on p. 214 of this book and p. of this thesis.

These considerations confirm the sense on which Prini's earlier works adopted an 'experimental' and 'open' approach to the critique of autonomous art. As has often been noted in discussion of Arte Povera, and as is indicated here, these approaches are intimately related to the notion of the "open work" articulated in Umberto Eco's influential, *Opera aperta*, in which the character of a wide range of cultural, scientific, linguistic, social and political senses of what he diagnoses as an historically novel "poetics of openness" are examined, thus:

> Certainly this new receptive mode vis-à-vis the work of art opens up a much vaster phase in culture and in this sense is not intellectually confined to the problems of aesthetics. The poetics of 'the work in movement' (and partly that of the 'open work') sets in motion a new cycle of relations between the artist and his audience, a new mechanics of aesthetic perception, a different status for the artistic product in contemporary society. It opens a new page in sociology and in pedagogy, as well as a new chapter in the history of art. It poses practical problems by organizing new communicative situations. In short, it installs a new relationship between the *contemplation* and the *utilization* of a work of art. Seen in these terms and against the background of historical influences and cultural interplay which links art by analogy to widely diversified aspects of the contemporary worldview, the situation of art has now become a situation in the process of development. [...] In short, it is an 'open' situation, *in movement*. A work in progress.[24]

This passage certainly seems to describe the form and orientation of much in Prini's practice, but the implications of this are complex. The processual character of the constitutively 'unfinished' work that operates as an extended and novel "mechanics of aesthetic perception", if exemplified by Prini's works, would have now to be considered as subject to emphatic forms of closure. The 'meaning of any more or less straightforward' aesthetic of openness has changed. That this process in Prini's work has been registered, effectively, in a systematic fashion suggests that there is a 'logic' according to which it proceeds. But what is it, and what are the reasons for its operation?

Because of the reiterative character of the project an answer to this question is to be found through analysis of its more recent forms, into which all that is visible of its past is gathered. Given that the process of reproduction acts upon a body of work that

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[24] Umberto Eco, *Opera aperta*, Milan: Bompani, 1962, (translated by Anna Cancogni as *The Open Work*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 22-23.

performed a critique of artistic autonomy, the most consistent interpretation of this work is that its repetitive process is an attempt to salvage this critique.

One aspect of what is in question here can be indicated by briefly remarking the simultaneously integral and yet peripheral role played by documentary photographers and their images in the international dissemination and historical representation of Arte Povera. Perhaps the most familiar work in this tradition that survives as a documentary photograph is the often reproduced record made by Claudio Abate of Jannis Kounelis', *Untitled, Twelve Horses* (fig. 10).

Fig. 10: Jannis Kounelis, *Untitled, Twelve Horses*, installation at Galleria L'Attico, Rome, 1969, (photograph by Claudio Abate).

Famously, Kounelis' exhibit comprised twelve live horses tethered in the basement garage of the L'Attico gallery in Rome for three days in 1969. This constitutively temporary work was photographed by Abate and one of the images was selected by Kounelis to become the single photograph allowed to be stand as its document.[25] As

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[25] This limitation is fairly strictly enforced even though other images of its original exhibition exist in Abate's archive and whilst different photographs taken of it have been displayed in other contexts. For a discussion of the relation between this work, its documentation and the relationship that developed between Kounelis and Abate, see Christine Meyer-Stoll, "Träger der Erinnerung Fotografien als Dokumente", in *La Poetica dell' Arte Povera*, pp. 35-41. Stoll reproduces another, far more romantically resonant image of this work as taken by Paolo Mussat Sartor on the occasion of Kounelis' restaging of this work for the Venice Biennale in 1976. As she notes, this has only rarely been reproduced in publication and its setting, lighting, inclusion of a posed human figure as well as its tonal qualities, lay stress on what Lumley calls its 'classicising' aspect and these factors stand in contrast to Abate's image

Robert Lumley notes in a discussion of this work and its critical reception, these display both strongly classical, "mythicising", and radically anti-classical, "demythicising" aspects, thus: "While absolute mimesis and the apparent absence of artistic intention seemed to signal the extinction of art as creation", it can also be understood as a reprise of classical iconography, Lumley suggests, "as the *tableau vivant* of an artist who thinks of himself above all as a painter".[26] Such tension persists, and is amplified in Abate's image as it has come to be read.

In her discussion of the historical status of this image, Christine Meyer-Stoll hits on something significant: "Certainly [...] the radicality of the first exhibition was no longer repeatable [...] but also certain is the significance of the photograph by Claudio Abate, which can no longer be outdone in its replacement of the real experience".[27] It is Stoll's phrasing that is of interest here as it suggests the work is outdone, so to speak, by the image that can no longer "be outdone" as its record: an apparently purely temporal relation that supports a certain view of the generic memorialising operations of photographic images not unrelated to the conventionalised memorial functions granted photographs by Barthes. As the title of her essay suggests, Meyer-Stoll takes this relation to mean that the photographic record becomes the "Bearer of Memory" (*Träger der Erinnerung*) in a formally determined fashion and, significantly, not in terms of the material factors that are characteristic of the photograph's changing physical modes of being-able-to-bear the same image that might be used to memorialise the temporary event it depicts. Prini's work adopts a specifically critical relation to such forms of photographic memorialisation. Rather than accept the aesthetic relation to the past that is the memorial function of such documents of artworks this practice forces them to

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and the way it presents the live animals in the utilitarian garage in which they were originally presented (see the reproduction of this second image on p. 37).

[26] Robert Lumley, *Arte Povera*, p. 33.

[27] Ibid., p. 37. The translation from Meyer-Stoll's German is mine.

remain as a present claim on the notion of the future that was taken to give sense to the 'original' radical aesthetic gesture. What is most interesting about this particular contrast is that the discourse around Kounelis's work focuses on the remembrance of the moment of collision between different forms and significations of the live as opposed to the inanimate (the work's human and inhuman/animal terms).

Prini's work positions appropriation as the fate of the 'extra-artistic' moment of its anti-autonomous impulse. His attempt to continue the critique of autonomous art explicitly participates in what Stewart Martin has called, "anti-art's rejection of art's autonomy as a compensatory ideology in which domination is extended in a sublimated from".[28] In this context it is worth noting that, further to his definition of critical problems facing historical understanding of anti-art Martin continues:

> As an intensification of the critique of what art has become—to the point of art's very dissolution, whether into life or politics or silence—anti-art seems to present a paradox that is both irresistible in its critical ambition and an impracticable collapse. And, perhaps, as befits something irresistible but seemingly impossible, it tends to be held nostalgically as a seminal failure, in which the apparent internalisation of failure as its very principle degenerated into concealing the minimal success presupposed in order for it to fail.[29]

Though it is designed to perform a much more broadly historical function in Martin's narrative, considered in respect of the development of Prini's practice, this schematisation is critically useful. Martin identifies three main forms taken by anti-art; "the affirmation of non-art", "anti-art as politics" and "anti-art as anti-tradition". It allows one to distinguish the sense in which this practice started out in many respects presenting an anti-art claim in the mode of an "affirmation of life".[30] Prini's ongoing practice can be seen to have modulated this claim in relation to its own historical fate, to take as its focus the historically pressing facts of its immanent institutionalisation, or 'traditionalisation'. Thus it became embroiled in the complexities of "anti-art as anti-

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[28] Stewart Martin, "Autonomy and Anti-Art: Adorno's Concept of Avant-Garde Art", *Constellations*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2000, p. 197.
[29] Ibid., p. 199.
[30] Ibid., p. 199.

tradition" that Martin goes on to examine. In this light, Prini's practice could be described by its self-consciousness of the following critical-historical problem with which Martin characterises the more general critical fate of anti-art:

> Thus, the determination of the new's negation of the past is not simply prefigured by the past, but revealed retrospectively from the point of view of the new perspective created by the departure of the new work. The emergence of lineages in the history of this persistent withdrawal from tradition can create the appearance of linear progress. However, this is an illusion produced by the inversion of the determinate negation of the new, from a retrospective reconstruction of the past, to a prospective projection of the future.[31]

This way of thinking about the works' critical self-consciousness allows one to characterise the manner in which it attempts to perform an ongoing critique through the specifically photographic problematisation of phenomenological encounter with the works as they are restaged. Prini's practice can be seen as a somewhat perverse and temporally convoluted attempt to critically refigure the fate that awaits it and that would destroy the sense of its extra artistic claim. In general terms, any rejection of autonomy the works might be said to have performed earlier on comes to be acknowledged as temporally unstable and conceptually mutable. As such they demand rearticulation in terms that seek to retain critical meaning over and above that identity with themselves, which the works' becoming historical objects would seem to force. In effect, it is as if Prini's practice comes to perform both of the terms in the last clause of Martin's critical-historical problem; the inversion of the determinate negation of the (now past) claim on the new and the shift of emphasis onto its mode of futurity as a kind of consolatory critical illusion. In terms of the complex temporality of Prini's works, one can say that this problem of the relation between historical understanding and the form of aesthetic experience posited by the 'new' is split (or at least has an extensive form). The work constructs relations to the dated novelty of a claim on the future, but from the perspective of a perceptual problematisation of what might be involved in its 'current'

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[31] Ibid., p. 204.

experience. The important point is that the occupation of this territory offers the possibility of further critique, the focus of which is the fate of the first, now subtly but irretrievably lost claim on the character of anti-art.

The Impoverished Body of the Image

In light of these considerations it is obvious that a rather complex set of phenomenological problems arise for interpretation of these works. Important amongst these is the sense in which the artwork that sought to dissolve the autonomy of art seems to have accrued, or to have become imbued with, a 'life of its own' and that this critical problem is encountered as a relation between different forms of embodiment. This is paradoxical, especially given the fact that it is a problem that emerged over time in parallel to a growing emphasis on the problematic status of Prini's own 'life' as a central concern for his practice. This ambiguity is central to the critical impulse of the work under discussion. It is a structuring element of the emphasis placed on the phenomenology of its display and can be characterised as a kind of fiction.[32]

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[32] The notions of fiction and figure used in this chapter are suggested by the condensed material character and the complex hermeneutic status of Prini's works, analysed 'immanently' (as a problematic and difficult to discern whole), and his practice more generally, analysed 'symptomatically' (in the complex relations established to its cultural context and the historical reflexivity it has accrued in relation to this context). Searching for literary precedents to flesh out what the notion of fiction might mean in light of these considerations, one might do worse than look to the hermeneutic complexity that characterises the temporality of reading in Borges. For example, in one story, the characteristics of Jesus as a figure defined in terms of humility and ultimate sacrifice by the Church that took him as a figurehead, turn out, through delayed discovery of numerous, repressed and neglected heretical researches, to have been expressed most authentically in the act of betrayal performed by Judas, as this figure's willingness to take on a totally abject destiny is the most humbling sacrifice that theology (the subsequent science of his act) turns out to allow, thus: "[God] could have chosen *any* of the destinies which make up the complex web of history [...] He chose the vilest destiny of all: He was Judas" (Jorge Luis Borges, "Three Versions of Judas", in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and other Writings*, London & New York: Penguin Classics, 2000, p. 129). But the hermeneutical niceties of such sophisticated fictional constructions, shifted into the specifically condensed photographic register in question here, would seem to also take on a Beckettian cast, encouraging further elucidation as a species of the dilemma: "Suddenly, no, at last, long last, I couldn't any more, I couldn't go on. Someone said, you can't stay here. I couldn't stay there and I couldn't go on" (Samuel Beckett, "Texts For Nothing, 1", in *Collected Shorter Prose:*

According to an anecdote told about Prini, the repetitive aspect of his practice and his habitual reluctance to allow straightforward reproduction of works in books and catalogues, stems from an incident related to the publication of *Arte Povera: Conceptual, Actual or Impossible Art?*, edited by Germano Celant.[33] The story goes that, after Prini's first exhibitions in 1967 and 1968, Celant took possession of the negatives documenting his work for the production of the book. When the critic didn't return the negatives afterwards, Prini was left with no record of his works, other than that in print. His subsequent decision to document these sources produced a set of images that he, purportedly, liked better than the original things.[34] A distinct emphasis on reproduction has been central to his practice since, and the tale of how this came about 'rings true' when one considers its later development. However, it appears contradictory also, insofar as his contribution to the book that is supposed to have acted

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1945-1980, London: John Calder, 1984, p. 71). Complexities deriving from the necessity to interpret take on the grim form of enduring stasis. In relation to what I call "Prini's fiction", these precedents would combine to mean something like; a journey through archival plenitude reduced to standing still, or conversely, the state of not knowing how to continue in which the detail of what must be continued persists as degradation. Another fictional work does suggest itself as resonant with the relation described here and it has the value of standing as a commentary on themes in the Italian political sphere. It is Leonardo Sciascia's remarkable *The Moro Affair* (originally of 1978, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch, London: Granta, 1987), which positions itself in direct relation to the Borgesian themes of repetition, misrecognition and the fictionalisation of the apparently immediate in lived experience.

That the processes described here as characterising Prini's practice produces a relatively narrow range of thematically and structurally central figures, I take to be adequately demonstrated by the current discussion. The stress laid on the notions of "figure" and "the figural" takes advantage of the senses in which the term touches on a range of different questions of form, but always as either a question of processual formation or of mediation. The major senses emphasised here would then be, firstly, as a noun: in discourse on vision (figure, traditionally at least, indicating modalities of content as it takes on form); in rhetoric and logic (as, respectively, deviation from normative modes of expression and, perhaps especially, the form of a syllogism with respect to its middle term); also as an existential register of temporal affect in musical form (a synthesis of manifold measures that are felt as a group); as well as those senses figure has as a verb, which inflect the above with forms of agency. The general sense of figure as used here refers to the significant forms that certain things take on through the processes of mediation that come to characterise Prini's practice. In this vein, it stands as a corollary—on the literary side, so to speak, of his practice when seen as an activity that fictionalises—to questions of mediation and it is revealed, through examination of this practice's emphatically historical character, to be secondary to more general forms of mediation that one might describe as being institutional in form.

[33] Germano Celant, *Art Povera. Conceptual, Actual or Impossible Art?*, London: Studio Vista, 1969.

[34] The source of the anecdote related here is Jochen Kienzle, proprietor of the gallery *Kienzle and Gmeiner* in Berlin and Prini's dealer in Germany. Kienzle facilitated my visit to Modena, Italy, in 2002 in order to meet and interview Prini, for which I owe him thanks. This meeting served to foreground the importance of misdirection and misinformation for Prini. Needless to say, then, that the artist was more than happy to confirm this story did nothing to establish it as fact in any straightforward sense.

as a catalyst for this emphasis on reproduction is, already, deeply concerned with problems of repetition, the material contextualisation of image and text and the use of previously documented works. Whatever its veracity, this anecdote has attained the status of a myth of origin for Prini's practice and, like all such myths, it has a rather complex temporal form.[35]

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[35] In light of these observations, and by way of articulating what 'fills out' these relations, it is important to stress that Prini has consistently adopted a (quite enjoyably) belligerent relation to critics, curators and art institutions, which can be seen in his tendency to take advantage of the ambiguous status of what he makes—vis-à-vis persistent institutional desires to define even anti-art artworks as discrete, objectively dateable, autonomous objects—in order to spread confusion and often misinformation about himself and his works, (see footnote 2). One can also note the manner that the photographs reproduced in the catalogue to *Zero to Infinity* (fig.,) are given the weight of documents of singular works under the collective title *Fermacarte*, dating from 1968. This is misleading as the images show the works as documented in the process of being refigured for exhibition in Strasbourg in 1995. One might, in light of this elision, also note that Prini's personal belligerency apparently led to the sacking of Freidemann Malsch from his position as the curator of contemporary art at the Musée de la Ville, Strasbourg. According to yet another apocryphal anecdote; Malsch, facing an unexpected gap in the museum's exhibition programme, took the opportunity to invite Prini to stage a one-person exhibition there at late notice (*Stuck in Customs*, 1995). The experience of coping with Prini's eccentric demands was apparently too much for the museum administration, who are said to have promptly dismissed Malsch for introducing the idea.

Fig. 11: Emilio Prini, series of four photographs published as Prini's contribution to *Arte Povera Art Povera*, (pp. 254-7). Prini's images are given individual titles in this publication, the first, which depicts Prini rising from his bed is captioned with his name, The others are (top left), *Introduzione alle statue* (Introduction to all statues), (top right) *79 giorni alla statue* (79 Journeys of all Statues) and (bottom) *Fermacarte (detail)* (Paperweight, detail), *1968*.

Such considerations are not, or at least not merely, colourful adjuncts to more serious interpretation of Prini's work. They are important factors for any attempt to understand it. They serve to compound the hermeneutic complexity of the project, but are not psycho-biographical facts to be attributed explanatory purchase on the works. These considerations serve to foreground the manner in which 'Prini' features as an ambiguous and yet materially insistent, figure, presented through a range of more or less arbitrary distancing procedures as in *Fermacarte*.

Writing on the occasion of Prini's 1995 exhibition in Strasbourg, Freidemann Malsch described Prini's 1968 exhibition *Fermacarte*.

> A lead object, placed on the floor, reflected the weight of a young man (shown in a documentary photograph next to the object). From a distance its shape resembled that of a human body, without, however, bearing any direct relation to reality. The next work in the sequence consisted of lead weights placed over a stack of twelve large-scale photographs. The weights corresponded to Prini's own, pressing down like paperweights on the photographs. These in turn depicted people and animals moving close to the ground. The photographs thus represented the effect of weight on the body, lead representing the weight left behind once Prini has creatively taken flight. He occupied the space and laid out his phenotype in a almost morphological manner.[36]

Malsch's description of these works is made clearer when one takes the distinctness with which he treats them as a provisional descriptive convenience. Noting this allows one to characterise the manner in which the themes discussed in this chapter came to

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[36] Friedemann Malsch, *Emilio Prini: Ferme in dogana*, p. 4, as translated by Andrea Tarsia (and republished in Christov-Bakargiev, *Arte Povera*, p. 273).

shape Prini's practice. The discussion so far has sought to articulate and to explore the manner in which Prini's practice as a whole has come to be shaped by the relation between two commitments. Firstly, it is emphatically oriented towards a tension in claims on the immediate character of aesthetic experience. It is structured around the temporary, transitive, improvisatory and singular relation between each instance of his works' reiteration and what these commitments mean for any kind of phenomenological encounter with them. Secondly, what it is that is encountered comprises in excessively mediated arrangements of representationally condensed photographic objects. The second term of this practice is its concentration on mediation, the materiality of what is mediated and how it is mediated, the documentary repetition of prior claims on immediate experience and the problematisation of the institutional contexts in which such claims take place. These two aspects of Prini's practice, it should be clear, are in no way separable. The tensions they mark serve to problematise any idea of the constitutive function of any of the subject positions implied by the works' emphasis on the experience of it in display of whatever kind (whether book or exhibition). This is a practice that, in attempting to continue the critique of artistic autonomy (which is, so to speak, its mode of "expressing what exists") stages autonomy as a problem of the relation between the concepts of 'art' and the status of perception.

This discussion has articulated this characteristic of the work in terms of its complex forms of spatio-temporality as these seem to be at the core of its emphasis on photography. The sense in which, as an Arte Povera practice with an emphasis on existential and phenomenological problems pertaining to the institutionalisation of art and aesthetic experience, this practice performs a kind of institutional critique is not reducible to a concern for the revelation of the ideological impulse shaping the spaces of arts' display, nor only the conventional form of the organisations through which this

happens. It stages, implicitly perhaps, something far more general and interesting. Insofar as Prini's use of photography can be read according to the Merleau-Pontian concept of institution and instituting subjectivity, it has a broader form of reference that might inform one about the relations between the spatio-temporalities articulated through photographic mediation as such and the correlative character of the forms of experience that might be structured, affected or instituted through these. But what is it that this extended sense of institution reveals. I would argue that the instituting of photography as a problem of phenomenological experience is interpretable as an articulation of what one might call a social form of the flesh of the (this particular historical) world.

The Scale of the Photographic Apparatus as Attenuated Flesh

Two versions of an image depicting the body of a 35mm "Exacta" camera, pictured from the front, appeared as part of a proposal developed in 1968-9 for the exhibition *Conceptual art Arte Povera Land Art* to take place in Turin in 1970 (fig. 12). They are accompanied by a short text that details what the realisation of work would have entailed. A camera would be set up in the gallery to shoot from a fixed position at regular intervals over a ten-year period. It would do so according to unaltered control settings until, the proposal supposes, its mechanism would wear out. In the process an estimated 20,000 photographs would be produced and these were to be printed out according to equally pre-determined criteria. *Magnate* stands as a challenge to the conventional temporal limits that characterise the genre of temporary exhibitions of contemporary art as well as to the art status of the objects displayed in them.

Fig. 12: Emilio Prini, *Magnate*, 1968, as published in *Arte Povera Art Povera*, in illustration of Prini's contribution to the 1970 exhibition, *Conceptual art Arte Povera Land Art*, along with the text reproduced below.

E. Prini / magnate / photographic series / group 2000 pages relative to September 1968 / (4 phases) / a normal camera shoots continuously until the mechanism wears out / life expectancy of camera / 20,000 shots / estimated time of execution / 10 years / yearly series of 2000 elements / technique / black and white photography / ferrania paper / 3 M / K 203 3 / 30 x 40 each / aperture and shutter speed constant / tripod set at fixed inclination / 1969 / the camera used maintains its original value and adds to the art market.

The proposed work would have had a life that extended into exhibitions presumed to follow the one in which it was to be placed and its presence would have served to interrupt these by interfering with curatorial claims regarding their logical and historical coherence. Thus, with a remarkable economy of means, *Magnate* projects itself as a critique of the network of relationships between the individualized status of artworks and key institutional frameworks within which they are conventionally authenticated and disseminated. The conceptual mechanism that facilitates *Magnate's* critical impulse is a simple, but subtle, play on the range of temporal and spatial senses of the concept of scale. As such it poses a question to the kind of account given of scale (as opposed to temporality) by Elkin's (as discussed above). *Magnate* emphasises scale in such a way as to reveal it to be temporally and spatially articulated, indeed, to be a dimension that is only explicable in terms of spatio-temporality. As such it will only ever be understandable as having a concrete form (as being this or that dimension, space-time relation or event that takes place). This suggests that Elkins' stress on scale as the categorical expression of analysis that takes its orientation from one's own perceptual measure is limited by Elkins. He posits it as only working in one direction, so to speak.

Scale, here, would have to be a category that goes both ways. Elkins places an ultimately abstract physiological limit on the question of perceptual measure which is itself technical and historical. As such, the whole question of perceptual measure must be seen to be in some way mutable. Analysis would have to take account of the fact that what comes within the purview of the being that has such a measure as its mode of being-in-the-world is specifically scaled, situated, distant or near and in all these senses socially and culturally articulated. To put it in rather too brutally simple terms, the photograph as an image form is always bigger and smaller, saturated with paradoxes of distance and proximity and cultural meaning. This is a core aspect of its phenomenal form. The insistence on analysis of things according to one's own measure has to own up to the fact that what is one's ownmost in questions of perceptual measure is the experience of things that alter, defy, problematise and exceed it.

Magnate is an apparatus for producing a proliferation of images that, it is supposed, will sooner or later destroy it. Images would be realised as standardised prints that, on the one hand, would comprise an edition and on the other, would disrupt the process of this edition's value. Also, contrary to the proposal's claim—"the camera used *maintains its original value* and adds to the art market"—the camera would destroy itself as a specific and mundane embodiment of commodity value, whilst highlighting the magical transformation of this same body into a more 'elevated' form of commodity; an art relic (or, more properly in the context, it would become a kind of art *reliquary*). *Magnate*, to my knowledge, was never realised other than in the form of this proposal, though one version of the image that features in this has survived as a key element in many later works.

One can compare the concept of photographic apparatus articulated in *Magnate* to recent accounts of photography as exemplary of the atomisation of cultural meaning in a

'post-historical' or 'post-industrial' age as developed by Vilem Flusser. For Flusser: "Technical images are produced by apparatuses", and, "apparatuses, through the result of industry, point beyond the industrial context towards post-industrial society".[37] In this context:

> Images are meant to render the world accessible and imaginable to man. But, even as they do so, they interpose themselves between man and the world. They are meant to be maps, and they become screens. Instead of presenting the world to man, they re-present it, put themselves in place of the world, to the extent that man lives as a re-function of the images he has produced. He no longer deciphers them, but projects them back into the world "out there" without having deciphered them. The world becomes image-like.[38]

One point of making this reference to Flusser is to consider what he says about repetition as a possibility of the photographic apparatus: "It is true that one can, in theory, take a photograph over and over again in the same or a very similar way, but this is not important for the process of taking photographs. Such images are redundant: They carry no information and are superfluous".[39] It is, one might think, precisely such superfluity and redundancy that thematises Prini's articulation of photography as a form of use and a form of embodied experience. The comparison to Flusser's notion of the 'screen function' of images is key here. His naive chronology of the loss of any sense of the world as represented characterises the possibility of representation as being , at the same time, an intense perceptual event and as being entirely static. He takes no account of the possibility that the perceptual relations and the forms of superfluity in question entail the possibility of mutation and change.

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[37] Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Matthews, London: Reaktion Books, 2000, pp. 21-4. Flusser presents a polemical theorisation of photography according to a familiar division of history into two epochs defined by the invention of print technology and the later impact of photography. His hypothesis is that the latter form of technology is structured by a logic of the pre-programmed character of culture that has transformed the existence of human beings. He takes this to authorise a rather speculative dismissal of socio-historical, political and philosophical theorisations of modernity, and especially Marxist accounts of capitalist social relations as characterising the form of modernity. His rejection of such theories is extremely tendentious and to my mind extremely unconvincing. However, this is not the concern of the current discussion. His theory of photography remains interesting despite these concerns as it promotes the notion of technologically determined form of phenomenological experience in frankly existentialist terms.

[38] Vilem Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*

[39] Ibid., p. 26.

What Flusser says of the phenomenological character of photography is, however, useful: "The act of photography is that of 'phenomenological doubt' to the extent that it attempts to approach phenomena from any number of viewpoints. But the 'mathesis' of this doubt (its deep structure) is prescribed by the camera's programme".[40] Flusser's allusion to the guiding principle of *Camera Lucida* (the tension between *mathesis universalis* and *mathesis singularis*) transforms singularity into a general form of social relation between machinic-technical form and embodied-intentional experience. This is a theory of the flatness of a world of experience taken over by the ubiquity of technical modes of seeing and the forms of cultural meaning they are taken to imply. One can note that Prini's proposal for *Magnate* already offers a more concrete and apposite model through which to think such relations in more specific and less apocalyptic terms. The later transformations wrought upon the image of the camera in this proposal further thematise such relations. There is absolutely no reason why one cannot take Flusser's problem of the relation between ubiquitous technical form and its phenomenological implications and rid it of his instrumental interpretation of the flat and ultimately meaningless world of cultural activity he attempts to describe. However, what is left over serves to describe one of the most important relation that this thesis has been attempting to describe and evaluate. This is the relation between the levels of the inhuman and the human that are expressed in Merleau-Ponty's later account of perception (as articulated in the epigram to this section) and the fact that such perceptual experience has come to be saturated with photographic form. The explicit surface of cultural technique is, in this light, suffused with the plenitude of situated perceptual relations to things.

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[40] Ibid., p. 38.

Figs. 13, 14 & 15:
Emilio Prini, *Ferme in dogana* (Stuck in Customs), Strasbourg, 1995-6.

One might, historically, take Prini's proposal for *Magnate* as an interesting, but now compromised object; something that once made a challenging claim on the form of unexpected space and that did so through the condensation of relations between conventional notions of space and time embedded in normative practices and institutions of art. The continuing existence of one of the images of this camera as a

figure in the repetitious attempt to salvage this critical gesture articulates further sense or tensions in the simplistic supposition that photographic saturation of culture means sense is denuded of its thickness. One should, in this context bear in mind that for Merleau-Ponty, as the epigram to this section makes clear, the phenomenological thickness of perceptual experience only makes sense as a claim when it is considered as a correlative term in the relation between such plenitude and "the inconceivable flatness of being".

In this context the foregrounding of labile spatio-temporality as the characteristic form of instituting that is projected through Prini's practice speaks to the problem of what Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh might mean if thought seriously in terms of the socio-historical world it is articulated in order to explain. Against the grain of his contemporary interpreters, one might say that the concepts of the flesh of the world, language and perception must be articulated in historical and social terms if they are to be of use (with society and history as the figures of spatio-temporality and not origin and logos). This is, obviously, bound to remain a gestural notion. But it does, in light of Prini's practice prove to be rich in implications.

Something of the blankness and flatness of Flusser's metaphors of contemporary image culture and photographic form are discernible in Prini's use, for example, of the image of the camera taken from the *Magnate* proposal. Yet, in a different register, which it has been the purpose of this section to articulate, the complex process of material fictionalisation that has produced the temporary mutable and yet strangely consistent contrasts between such figures as the camera and the body (in figures 13, 14 and 15) takes, so to speak, such flatness as the condition of contemporary experience and thinks it as a problem of the abiding thickness of problematic perceptual experience. Here, scale, juxtaposition playful emphasis on context and the borderline ridiculousness

of Prini's insistence on the historicity of a range of objects that are generally taken not to be historically significant opens photographic flatness to consideration as a formation of flesh.

This section has attempted to characterise and to explore the implications of the senses in which Prini's practice stands as a phenomenologically insistent and socially articulated, critical intervention into the specifically photographic form of aesthetic experience. In the process questions of relations between space and time as explicative of photography as an image form have been considerably complicated in terms of their relation to the embodied character of perception and how this might relate to notions of art practice.

The manner in which Prini's works suggest themselves to phenomenological analysis is thus an amplification of issues of temporality and spatiality in photography considered more generally. In this light it does seem to occupy a position that makes sense of the relation between the Merleau-Pontian concern for embodied perception characterised according to the notion of reversibility and under threat from the tendency to operationalist thinking. It is a project that interrogates the conditions of expression as a critical problem. It is also a project that views photographic culture as a form of general institutional agency operating to repeat and estrange embodied perception from its location and sense. As such, given the reservations articulated earlier about Barthes' conception of photography, Prini's practice seems to offer a model of photographic spatio-temporality that performs a similar critical function but with more material, social and historical purchase on its context. However, there remains a deep problem with the account given of this practice here. Despite its complexities and their usefulness for articulating a possible phenomenological discourse of contemporary photographic art, the emphasis on the singular identity and embodied individual, Prini,

threatens to limit the significance and range of reference of this critical account to an overly singularised notion of the subject of embodied perception. This practice and the account given of it here point in the direction of a socially instituted sphere of intersubjective relations, but the social as a category remains strictly delimited in it.

The following section will attempt to characterise what might be problematic here through an account of the stringent socio-historical emphases that structure the photographic work of Allan Sekula.

There is no art that does not contain in itself as an element, negated, what it repulses. If it is more than mere indifference, the Kantian 'without interest' must be shadowed by the wildest interest, and there is much to be said for the idea that the dignity of artworks depends on the intensity of the interest from which they are wrested.

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

There are thus two historicities. One is ironic or even derisory, and made of misinterpretations, for each age struggles against the others as against aliens by imposing its concerns and perspectives upon them. This history is forgetfulness rather than memory; it is dismemberment, ignorance, externality. But the other history, without which the first would be impossible, is constituted and reconstituted step by step by the interest which bears us toward that which is not us.

Merleau-Ponty, *Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence*

That is, that the things have us, and that it is not we who have the things. That the being that has been cannot stop having been. The "Memory of the World". That language has us and that it is not we who have language. [...] But then how to understand the subjectivity? [...] The solution is to be sought in vision itself: memory will be understood only by means of it. Vision has to be already a modulation or a winding in the one, a variant of a perceptual system of the world, in order that memory can be and can involve forgetting. [...] The problem of forgetting: lies in the fact that it is discontinuous. If at each phase of the Ablaufphänomen, a segment of the past would fall into oblivion, we would have a field of the present like a diaphragm of on objective, and forgetting would be occultation resulting form the removal of the efficacious stimuli, it would be the point where the clear image is no longer produced because the corporeal trace is effaced. Or again, in idealist language: forgetting would be a part of the present-past system, in exact correspondence with a new segment of present descended from the future.

Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*

PART TWO: ALLAN SEKULA'S 'EXISTENTIAL PROBLEMATIC' AND THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL CHARACTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY AS A SOCIAL FORM

A Specifically Photographic Art?

Since the 1970s Allan Sekula has published a number of widely influential critical essays on photography, in parallel to which he has produced a body of photographic artworks that can, by no means, be said to have attracted the same level of critical

attention given his writings. Yet, it is as an integral project that these parallel activities make most sense and present a remarkably consistent and conceptually rich interrogation of photography as a social form.[41]

It is well known that Sekula's work is oriented by the desire to articulate a practice of socially critical documentary photography that would take the form of, "an art that documents monopoly capitalism's inability to deliver the conditions of a fully human life".[42] Yet, what critical attention his artwork has received tends to play down the complex aesthetic issues foregrounded by the fact that it is as an art that such socially critical documentary photography is to be realised. This emphasis is understandable, given the manner in which issues of content are foregrounded and taking into consideration that this project is defined in opposition to notions of art photography based in a formal aesthetics derived from Kantian principles of disinterested aesthetic judgements.[43] I would argue, however, that for any attempt to understand this emphasis in both his writings and artworks—and indeed, through them, to critically evaluate

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[41] Benjamin Buchloh remarks that Sekula's art practice has been overshadowed by his, "extraordinary record as a writer, critic, historian and theoretician of photography" (in, "Allan Sekula: in Conversation with Benjamin H. D. Buchloh", in *Allan Sekula. Performance Under Working Conditions*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser, Vienna: Hatje Cantz Verlag and Generali Foundation, 2003, p. 21 and p. 43.). Elsewhere, he defends Sekula against his prior "illegibility" for the art world (in "Allan Sekula: Photography Between Discourse and Document", *Fish Story*, Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 1995). Whilst it seems clear that this accurately describes longstanding curatorial and critical attitudes to Sekula's practice, stemming from his insistence on politicised content, one can also note the ways his critical approach has affected his images. Many photographs published in the 1980s, for instance, have been taken to be 'unaesthetic'. This resulted from quasi-systematic rules orienting their taking and was an effect of attempts to avoid the 'spectacularising' tendencies sedimented in the conventionalised aesthetics of different genres of documentary practice. As such, in fact, this amounts to a critically articulated and photographically specific, aesthetic. See, for instance, the way that architectural photography is dealt with over the long gestation period of *Geography Lesson: Canadian Notes*, Vancouver and Massachusetts: Vancouver Art Gallery and MIT Press, 1997. With the publication of another laboriously produced work, *Fish Story* in the 1990s, the situation changed somewhat and it is perhaps not coincidental that Sekula's newfound institutional legibility coincides with this work's engagement with the conventional aesthetics of photographic print and exhibition forms.

[42] Allan Sekula, 'Dismantling Modernism' in *Dismal Science: Photo Works 1972-1996*, Illinois: University Galleries Illinois State University, Normal, 1999, p. 138.

[43] For an example of one text that misrecognises the concept of art orienting Sekula's photographic practice see Russell Fergusson, *Open City: Street Photography Since 1950,* Oxford: MOMA, 2001, p. 16. The most obvious targets of Sekula's critique of aesthetic theories based in formalist interpretations of Kant's aesthetics are Clement Greenberg (the exemplary American aesthetic 'formalist') and, in terms specific to photography, John Szarkowski.

whether his work stands as a compelling critique of contemporary capitalism—consideration of the relationship between his writing and photographic works is imperative. Indeed, they demand analysis in terms of the way that, together, they contribute to the articulation of a specifically photographic art that might stand as a vehicle for social critique. The need for such a synthetic account of Sekula's project is also suggested by the fact that, in recent years, he has explicitly sought to further his earlier, didactic, problematisation of conventional disciplinary boundaries between text and image to produce self-consciously "para-literary" photographic artworks as a form of address to this general critical ambition.[44] It is this attempt to articulate a specifically photographic art, structured around an interrogation of photography as a social form that extends over different conflicted registers of text and image and that does so with an emphatic commitment to the existential form of photography's descriptive operations.

Sekula's photographic work will probably seem to be the last that one would want to describe in existential and phenomenological terms. In many respects, it is. This is one of the reasons for discussing it in the current context. In order for any phenomenology of photographic art to be cogent and relevant it must have purchase not only on those practices that suggest themselves in an intuitive and immediate manner for phenomenological analysis according to one or other theme, category, convention of critical reception or mode of appearance. Sekula's practice stands as a test case for thinking through the problems that such a theory undoubtedly faces given the directions

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[44] See Sekula's comments in, On "Fish Story": The Coffin Learns to Dance, *Camera Austria*, Nos. 59 / 60, 1997. The concept of the para-literary, here, offers an example of the manner in which Sekula attempts to embrace contradiction in his artwork. One can note a proximity in his use of the term to the following definition offered by Rosalind Krauss: "The paraliterary space is the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation; but it is not the space of unity, coherence, or resolution that we think of constituting the work of literature", from "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary", in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986, pp. 292. However, the basically Lukácsian commitment that determines Sekula's approach to the heavily internationalised formation of text and image combinations, as these are productive of complex and emphatic totalities, sits uneasily with the anti-totalising impulse that is made explicit in the 'poststructuralist' sense Krauss stresses.

taken by photographic art and critical theory over the last forty years. His photographic work is closely associated with a critical project explicitly framed in opposition to formal and universal theories of photography and his writings, especially, tend towards a high degree of social and historical specificity, again, as a way of avoiding what he asserts is problematic about very ontologically oriented theories of photography.

The first epigram to this chapter (from Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*) would seem to describe precisely key aspects of the orientation of this project insofar as it is an art of emphatic critique. One of the main aesthetic or artistic objects of Sekula's critique is the tendency to formalism and transcendental theories of aesthetic value as these took shape in discourse around modernist visual arts and as they have persisted in photographic discourse. An important point emerges here with regard to the dialectical character of critique in the context. Adorno's dialectical revision of conventional interpretations of the Kantian aesthetic principle of disinterestedness as an aesthetic principle is characteristic of Sekula's treatment of documentary form and photographic aestheticism. The double illusion of a pure aesthetic comportment towards the image *and* the dispassionate claim to objective truth are two sides of the same photographic coin, so to speak, which together effectively assert claims on an unexamined notion that photographic aesthetics needs to occupy the territory of disinterest most convincingly in order to attain the 'dignity' of its aesthetic possibility. Aesthetic experience is, in this context, always something of a soiled affair that wins a sense of dignity at the price of forgetting that it is founded on occlusion of just what interests are at stake.

These are not the only reasons for discussing Sekula's work with an emphasis on their phenomenological aspect. Critical consideration of possible and available forms for the organisation of photographs are central to Sekula's project. The key form for his attempt to articulate a specifically photographic art is the photographic sequence. His

approach to constructing sequences is dialectical. This means that, whilst it derives from criticism of certain attitudes to the aesthetic value of singular images and the bureaucratic displacements of archival form it constitutes itself, reiteratively, by holding different concrete instances of these dominant forms up to scrutiny (at least this is the ambition). Existing forms are not simply dismissed. They are held open as problematic possibilities, so to speak. Sekula's artworks share a little bit in the aesthetics of the single image (one major object of his critique) just as they constitutively fail to extricate themselves from the possibility of serial administration (which is another).

If Sekula's project comprises, as I argue in what follows, one of the most compelling claims to the character of a specifically photographic art that has been made in recent years, this claim is not (or at least not simply) a fact beholden to the ascendancy of photography in art market terms and the newfound celebration of 'straight' documentary photography in this sphere. Sekula's work 'turned', in the early 1970s, towards a critical notion of photographic sequence as a degraded, or at least highly problematic, form in order to think of and deal with problems of social content an the expansion of what art might be was a condition of this focus on documentary truth. From the point of view of its relation to the social documentary tradition's long-standing concern for contents, Sekula's problematisation of this tradition's shortcomings has been approached by shifting them onto the terrain of art. Photographic sequences, the claim is, might stand as contingent and critically meaningful in a spectacularised photographic culture that is overdetermined by the twists and turns of the relationship between aestheticism and bureaucracy, objectivism and subjectivism; the conceptual poles of photographic culture that Sekula takes to provide the horizon of contemporary photographic meaning and the possibility of its critical refiguration as an art. What is won back from this sphere through the strategic use of sequences is a

critical *art* of documentary realism. As an art, it distinguishes itself from the fantasy of unmediated representation that haunts documentary practice and it does so by problematising the phenomenological conditions of its aesthetic reception. It is highly self-reflexive with regard to the mutability and reproducibility of photographs and the pressures upon their discursive contextualisation and the institutional frameworks they may be encountered within. It is emphatically phenomenological in the way it treats such problems, though this emphatic phenomenology is odd because it is historically articulated through the general critique of photographic discourse.

Analysis of Sekula's artwork as a critical project is not only of significance for an attempt to understand its internal logic. Detailed analysis of the *emphatic* and *problematic* conception of the photographic artwork articulated through this practice, also promises much of value for critical examination of the ascendancy of photography as an art with which its development has coincided historically. The analyses presented here are oriented by the judgement that Sekula's sustained interrogation of the possibility of a critical cultural practice has met with most success where the socio-political efficacy of documentary form is articulated through the problematisation of photography as an art and this problematisation is sensitive to its own historical context as well as claims to photographic art from previous eras. However, the judgement that its art status is key presents as many problems for determining what sense the concept of art retains in Sekula's practice as it does for thinking through the notion of photography with which the notion of art is emphatically linked.[45]

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[45] One might, for instance, compare the relative complexity of formal construction in two works. In *Waiting for Tear Gas (White Globe to Black)*, of 1999-2000, a sequence of 81 photographs (published in various formats and exhibited as a slide projection), documents one night of the anti-capitalist protests in Seattle in 1999. The formal arrangement of these remains fairly straightforward, complicated only by two evocative images of a white plastic globe standing on a library filing cabinet at the beginning of the sequence and another similar, but black, globe at the end (see pages 89 & 104 of *TITANICs wake*, Cherbourg: Le Point de Jour Éditeur, 2003, pp. 85-104). Problems of formal organisation remain quite

It should be noted that both Sekula's writings and his photographic works borrow widely and strategically from a range of theoretical, historical and literary sources. One effect of this is that many of the concepts and categories, forms and procedures that are appropriated, stand in more or less contradictory relation to each other in the works they serve to structure. Indeed, it is Sekula's consistent attempt to develop a practice that deals directly with contradiction, at a number of different levels, which makes it interesting and historically apposite.

In light of these considerations, this discussion of Sekula's project attempts to articulate the sense in which its familiar critical aims are oriented by a conceptually explicit 'existential problematic'. On the basis of this characterisation, I argue that it is the manner in which this existential framework forces problematisation of the notion of the photographic-artwork that serves to foreground the phenomenological character of photography as a social form. The first and most obvious aspect of this phenomenological problem pertains to the staging of the critique of photographic discourse as a critic of socio-historical reality. The less obvious phenomenological problem arises through discussion of this first and it concerns the character of photography as such. In light of these claims, the first questions to address are: What is the character of Sekula's critical notion of photography? And, how and why is it oriented towards an existential problematic?

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conventionally mediated in this work. Comparatively, *Freeway to China (Version 2, from Liverpool)*, of 1998-9, stages a far more telling set of formal parallels as problems of relation between the photographic depiction of specific issues of labour as a global issue linked by international relations in industrial actions in support of striking Liverpool dockworkers during the late 1990s. See, *Freeway to China*, in *Allan Sekula: Performance Under Working Conditions*, pp. 278-305.

Sekula's Theorisation of Photography

Firstly, one should note the manifest sense in which any claim on cultural practice that is oriented to thinking "the conditions of a fully human life"— even if in a stringently negative or culturally highly specified manner—clearly announces that it is deeply marked by a concern for a broadly defined and intrinsically existential theme. The question is, whether emphasising this adds much of critical value to consideration of the well known, quite strictly socially and historically delimited categories that shape this practice? Perhaps one reason for the critical neglect of this question is that, quite simply, the results of any inquiry based upon it would turn out to be banal?

Sekula's explicit theorisation of photography can be, and conventionally has been, characterised by three obvious and interrelated concerns. Firstly, it is constituted through rejection of specifically photographic (as well as more generally artistic) forms of modernism: it aspires to a stringent anti-modernism (and modernism is characterised as idealist in its strong formalist tendency and thus as being ideologically pernicious). Secondly, dominant modes of thinking about photography (and cultural practice more generally) are confronted with a conception of the discursive basis of cultural meaning and the socio-historical basis of discourse (which, is considered to be a political problem at the level of specific instances of representation). Photographic culture, for example, is asserted as a complex matrix of signifying practices and not as a set of discreet visual objects and behaviours. Importantly, in this context, questions as to what photography essentially *is* are displaced onto a critical account of signifying practices that are articulated in socio-historical terms. Such issues are exemplified, but not exhausted, by modernist claims on the photograph as an aesthetic object of more or less pure visual appreciation. These two commitments are oriented by a critique of

capitalism that is Marxian in character and which comprises the third obvious term of Sekula's theorisation of photography.[46] The need to articulate a critical theory of photography arises from social forms of iniquity and their cultural elision.

Thus, broadly speaking, Sekula's theorisation of photography is explicitly meta-critical, yet it is oriented by the criticism of the tendency of meta-critical discourse to formalism: "The crisis of contemporary art involves more than a lack of 'unifying' meta-critical thought". The general impulse here is towards a meta-critical theoretical framework that resists formal unification.[47] The reason for this is not aesthetic in any simple or straightforwardly formal sense. This problematised notion of meta-critical generality is imposed upon Sekula's project by its self-understanding of the object of critique, the form of socio-historical reality as this is already described through cultural forms and as these might be refigured or interrogated for possibilities of critical re-orientation. As noted above this is a project oriented to understand and criticise the deleterious effects of capitalism. The object of critique is a form of generality that is global in reach and that has effects, which are constitutively generic at an existential level, so their critique must also strive to attain something of this level of generality. In

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[46] Sekula's theorisation of photography takes an essayistic form in its examination of delimited episodes in the history of photography and art practice and does not have the abstract character that calling it a theory might lead one to expect. This point goes to the heart of the matter at hand, indicating as it does the centrality given the notion that social forms are historically dynamic and that cultural meanings are, thus, contingent. In a strong sense, the analyses presented in Sekula's writings and the manner in which his artworks can be said to be critical are not supposed to be separable according to the division 'theory and practice'. Having noted this, the key texts in which he does articulate more general theoretical aspects of photography are as follows: "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning", originally published in *Art Forum*, vol. 13, no. 5, January 1975, republished in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin, Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1982 (from which all references here are taken); "Dismantling Modernism: Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)" (2nd version), in *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 19, no. 4, December 1978, and republished in *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photoworks 1973-1983*, Halifax, Nova Scotia: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984; "The Traffic in Photographs", originally published in *Art Journal*, vol. 41, no. 1, Spring 1981, and also republished in *Photography Against the Grain*, 1984; "Photography Between Labour and Capital", in, *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Sheddon Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton, 1948-1968*, Halifax, Nova Scotia: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983; "The Body and the Archive", *October 39*, Winter, 1986.

[47] Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism", *Dismal Science*, p. 119.

a strong sense, the figure of this relation is photography. The fact that photography is, or at least has been, the globally dominant form of image throughout the twentieth century presents problem for its aesthetic critique. Photography, in this context and considered ontologically, might even be said not to exist (recall Tagg's denial of the critical valence of any such term) rather, splintering into a range of diverse practices, issues and problems. Indeed, Sekula's critical writings address photography in just such a manner, treating well-defined problems and episodes that are culturally and historically delimited. Yet, it remains the case that overall this critical project is oriented to a more general form of critique and an implicit ontological field.

Sekula's two earliest published essays, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning" and "The Traffic in Photographs" stake out the framework of his critical approach in ways that remain critically apposite, even if some of the terminology with which they do so has been modified. In these essays, Photographic meaning emerges through exchanges of information located in systems of socially structured communicative practice. What might appear to be discreet moments of aesthetic experience are defined in terms of the ways that, as social practices, they project semantic "limiting functions" that shape "shared expectations as to meaning".[48] The notion of exchange gives character and intelligibility to the concepts of information and communication that Sekula uses to describe these systematic relations.[49] The semantic unit of the message

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[48] Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning", p. 84.

[49] The elaboration of photography's discursive character in terms of the conceptual opposition information/communication deserves further comment. Whilst the notions of exchange developed in this essay (and of 'traffic' in his other early essay, "The Traffic in Photographs") remain central to Sekula's later practice, the concepts of information and communication have tended to be replaced with others less resonant of the formally abstract tendencies of information and systems theories. The basic critical concern to articulate the social and historical conditions of cultural meaning and the complexities thus introduced in consideration of the photographic sign has, despite these reorientations, remained pivotal for Sekula's theorisation of photography. It is, perhaps, interesting to note that this change in critical terms occurred in parallel to the development of digital imaging technologies and their celebration and/or the panic they induced in much critical commentary. Whilst, initially, Sekula seemed open to the critical discourse of information technology, the actualisation of digital media on a broad social scale has made

may well be formally or 'analytically' definable, but it is only ever *actualised* in the form of socially instituted relations of exchange. Overly formal definitions of the photograph—on the part of aesthetic ontologies of the photograph as well as in semiotic accounts of its structure as a sign—only serve to deny the characteristic of photography as a tendentious and dynamic social form. It is of central import that the exchange relations within which photographic meaning is constituted are not equitable. The emphasis is on wresting a critical conception of photography from the dominant discourses that frame and lay claim to the cultural values that surround and mediate them, thus: "We must understand the way in which photography constructs an imaginary world and passes it off as reality [...] How does photography serve to legitimate and normalise existing power relationships? How does it serve as the voice of authority, while simultaneously claiming to constitute a token of exchange between equal partners"?[50] For Sekula, such questions are framed, specifically, in opposition to formalising tendencies in photographic critical discourse and practice.

> Quite regularly we are informed that the photograph 'has its own language', 'is beyond speech', is a message of 'universal significance' – in short that photography is a universal and independent language or sign system. Implicit in this argument is the quasi-formalist notion that the photograph derives its semantic properties from conditions that reside within the image itself.[51]

In this context, the nearest Sekula actually gets to offering an ontological determination of photography himself is when he describes photographs as bearing an "unavoidable social referentiality", as in the following description of the beginning of his concern for documentary photography:

> In 1971, when I first began making photographs with any seriousness, the medium's attraction was, for me, its unavoidable social referentiality, its way of describing – albeit in enigmatic, misleading, reductive and often superficial terms – a world of social institutions, gestures, manners, relationships. And the problematic character

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more and more emphatic and historically distinct what has thus emerged as an, in some senses literally anachronistic, insistence on film, or 'analogue', based photography in his practice.

[50] Allan Sekula, *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures 1948-1968: A Selection from the Negative Archives of Sheddon Studio, Cape Breton*, eds. B. H. D. Buchloh & R. Wilkie, Halifax, Nova Scotia: Press of the Nova Scotia University of Art & the University College of Cape Breton, 1984, p. 193.

[51] Ibid., p. 84.

> of this descriptive power is itself compelling, compounded by the fact that the life world that beckons is one in which the photographer is already a social actor, never the completely innocent bystander.[52]

Now, despite the fact that this is expressed in the context of a critical practice defined by the task of negating formal ontologies of the photograph (of whatever stamp), this is nonetheless (and admittedly in casual terms) an ontological determination of photography. This much is obvious. Whatever ontology of photography might be implied here is intrinsically social. Its sociality is characterised by the existential perspective of each and every possible social agent that might take up a relation to a photograph in one way or another. Such agents are not abstractly defined subjects of aesthetic experience but, rather, they are caught up in their world and, as such, they (and their forms of representation, cultural institutions, mores and enigmas) are historically situated by the limitations and perspectives of their position in this world. Though it has not received much comment in critical discourse on Sekula's work, I take this statement (and others like it) to be descriptive of the general orientation of his project, as a project. The interesting thing about Sekula's approach here is that he is describing the problematic and fundamentally existential character of photography and his critical response to this as it spans the historical relations between a certain trajectory of art practices *and* a certain critical history of photographic discourse. His anti-ontological theorisation of photography as a social form takes shape as a historically articulated aesthetics that aims at a specifically photographic art.

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[52] Allan Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain*, p. ix. Buchloh's description of the dialectical mode of this aspect of Sekula's practice as the construction of a "rhetoric of the photographic" is, perhaps, the most compelling to have attempted to understand Sekula's theoretical and critical account of photography in relation to his notion of photographic-art.

> Sekula constructs what one could call a rhetoric of the photographic: his accounts of the instability of photographic meaning continuously oscillate between a conception of photography as contextual (i.e., as a discursively and institutionally determined fiction) and a conception of photography as referential (i.e., as an actual record of complex material conditions
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> Buchloh, "Allan Sekula: Photography Between Discourse and Document", pp. 194-5.

In light of the relation between formal aesthetic theories of the photograph, their tendency to formalism and their ontological assertiveness, one must note that Sekula adopts a pragmatically defined and suspended perspective in the ontological implications of his own photographic practice. The demand for general ontological claims is displaced onto the form of organisation of each artwork, which tend to place a great stress on their status as complex unities, or totalities, are circumscribed by the content of their critical focus and which seek to allow for plural aesthetic relations between elements and an open ended or plural interpretative character. Such strategies are shaped by one central thesis: the manner in which he views the history of claim and counter claim regarding the meanings and values of photographs, antinomically. Sekula underwrites his critique of explicit and implicit formal ontologies of the photograph through appeal to Georg Lukács' meta-critical thesis of the "antinomies of bourgeois thought" (as developed in his seminal, 1923, study of reification in *History and Class Consciousness*). Lukács' thesis of the antinomies of bourgeois thought stems from his commitment to a revolutionary Marxist politics, critically attenuated by an insistence on the continuing relevance of German philosophical idealism. He considered this tradition to be symptomatic of its historical context and read it as giving expression to the fundamental contradictions of bourgeois social reality, whilst also offering key concepts through which to think them. Thus: "Modern critical philosophy springs from the reified structure of consciousness".[53]

In Sekula's terms this is expressed in the following manner: "The hidden imperatives of photographic culture drag us in two contradictory directions: toward 'science' and a

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[53] Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 110.

myth of 'objective truth' on the one hand, and toward 'art' and a cult of 'subjective experience' on the other".[54] Further to the same point, Sekula writes:

> I see my own project as an attempt to understand the social character of "the traffic in photographs". Taken literally this traffic involves the social production, circulation and reception of photographs in a society based on commodity production and exchange. Taken metaphorically, the notion of traffic suggests the peculiar way in which photographic meaning—and the very discourse of photography—is characterised by an incessant oscillation between what Lukács termed the "antinomies of bourgeois thought". This is always a movement between objectivism and subjectivism. Depending on the circumstances, it may also be a movement between rationalism and irrationalism, positivism and metaphysics, scientism and aestheticism. We can detect its rhythm in advertising jargon and in criticism.[55]

The same appeal to Lukács' theory of the antinomies of bourgeois thought is made in most if not all of Sekula's critical discussions of photography in one way or another. Importantly, this indicates a quite fundamental problem for the experience of photographic meaning, as such, and not just a problem with historical inquiry. Thus: "Every photograph tends, at any given moment of reading in any given context, towards one of these two poles of meaning".[56] This statement needs to be understood in light of the claim to photography's unavoidable descriptive operations vis-à-vis its social context as it serves to characterise the critical possibility of refiguring photographic art, critically. The world replete with ideologically determined significations that stands to be depicted by the consolatory normative functions of existing art practices is, as such, always already encountered as having been overwritten (to the deepest level of any possible experience of it as a social world, as a world in which one's desiring relations to others unfold and as a natural environment) by the interests that shape cultural forms and that are, in their turn, revealed to be shaped by the forces and movements of capital. Here one finds something of a similarity at the level of theory construction with Barthes account of the experience of mass media culture. The difference is that Barthes'

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[54] Sekula, *Mining Photographs,* p. 200.

[55] Allan Sekula, "Introduction" to *Photography Against the Grain*, p. xv. See also the development of the metaphorisation of exchange in terms of "traffic" in "The Traffic in Photographs", originally published in the *Art Journal*, New York: Spring, 1981, pp. 15-25, republished in *Photography Against the Grain* (from which all references here are taken).

[56] Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning", p. 85.

pessimistic acedia encouraged him not to follow the path of detailed socio-historical analysis of particular forms.

These commitments structure Sekula's treatment of photographic signs as units of tendentious social exchange. They give a framework to his notion of the possibilities of critical descriptive photographic practice, thus: "Against the photoessayistic promise of 'life' caught by the camera, I sought to work from within a world already replete with signs".[57] In his contribution to *Mining Photographs* Sekula's draws in a general fashion on the concept of "The Society of the Spectacle" developed by the *Situationist International* in order to give an account of the spectacularised character of such cultural form. Taking as an example pictorial histories and their secondary, archival distance from lived-experience, Sekula describes photography in terms of the spectacularisation of social experiences: "The widespread use of photographs as historical illustrations suggests that significant events are those, which can be pictured, and thus history takes on the character of *spectacle*. But this pictorial spectacle is a kind of rerun, since it depends on prior spectacles for its supposedly 'raw' material".[58] Normative modes of photographic consumption encourage a contemplative and irreal

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[57] Sekula, *Photography Against the Grain* p. X. As this statement makes clear, in the first instance, Sekula's notion of photographic sequence is defined in opposition to the journalistic photo-essay. Thus: "I am not talking about "photo-essays", a cliché-ridden form that is the non-commercial counterpart to the photographic advertisement. Photo essays are an outcome of a mass-circulation picture-magazine aesthetic, the aesthetic of the merchandisable column-inch and rapid, excited reading, reading made subservient to visual titillation". A recent example of Sekula's attempt to carry these concerns back into the pages of a newspaper is, *Black Tide/Marea Negra*, (2002/03), a photo-text work for *Culturas,* the weekly magazine supplement of the Barcelona newspaper *La Vanguardia*, 12 February 2003. This work documents the clean-up operation after a recent oil tanker disaster off the Galician coast of Spain, with a sequence of images depicting the voluntary force of cleaners and a text in the form of a spoof opera libretto, which is understandable as an intervention into the conventions of the colour supplement photo-essay and feuilletonistic journalism. Typically, Sekula uses an anecdote to portray an episode reporting a visit the King of Spain paid to the site whilst the 'chorus' of volunteers are cleaning the beaches: "The King appears, stage right, surrounded by his retainers and a clutch of photographers. The chorus continues its Sisyphean labour, largely oblivious to the royal retinue. The king suddenly twists backwards on one leg to inspect the bottom of his shoe. The photographers turn away in unison from this forbidden gesture". The monarch undergoes his trivial humiliation and is granted immunity from it by the body of the press in a way that establishes a sarcastic parallel between the mess he steps into and the mess the volunteer cleaners deal with as a matter of principled decision.

[58] Sekula, *Mining Photographs* p. 199.

sense of *omnipotence*, for which everything is made available, and in the process is reduced to aestheticised contemplation. Secondly, the infinite horizon encouraged by the potential to place a camera anywhere and photograph anything, holds out an equally experientially redundant sense of *omnipresence* that over-extends and situates the viewer in the position of a paradoxically static entity:

> The viewer [...] loses any ground in the present from which to make critical evaluations. In retrieving a loose succession of fragmentary glimpses of the past, the spectator is flung into a condition of imaginary temporal and geographical mobility. In this dislocated and disoriented state, the only coherence offered is that provided by the constantly shifting position of the camera, which provides the spectator with a kind of powerless omniscience.[59]

In opposition to this tendency Sekula attempts to develop a practice of sequential organisation that aims at the recuperation of critical realism of an overdetermined world. His basic commitment to the descriptive character of photographic images and its qualification in terms of the spectacularised ends to which it is conventionally put lead him to further qualify the specifically social character of photographic signification as an extended form of social encounter with phenomenological resonance, thus;

> The rhetorical strength of documentary is imagined to reside in the unequivocal character of the camera's evidence, in an essential realism [...]. Vision, itself unimplicated in the world it encounters, is subjected to a mechanical idealisation. Paradoxically, the camera serves to ideologically *naturalise* the eye of the observer. Photography, according to this belief, reproduces the visible world: the camera is an engine of fact, the generator of a duplicate world of fetishised appearances, independent of human practice. Photographs, always the product of socially specific *encounters* between human-and-human or human-and-nature, become repositories of dead facts, reified objects torn from their social origins.[60]

Again, in this last sentence, one finds a statement of the general existential orientation of this project and its articulation in terms of a socialised phenomenological aesthetics of photographic form. Though one might not be accustomed to thinking of Sekula's work in relation to the phenomenological aesthetics of Merleau-Ponty, there is a deep resonance between the latter's existentially articulated account of habitual forms of technically denuded perceptual access to the social world and Sekula's criticism of

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[59] Ibid.

[60] Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism", in *Allan Sekula: Dismal Science Photoworks 1972-1996*, ed. Debra Risberg, Illinois: University Galleries Illinois State University, 1999, p. 56.

photographic discourse here. What Sekula's much more sympathetic account of photographic signification adds to this comparison is an account of the ways in which what one might well name a form of operational thinking provides the means for critical revision. The key to this linkage is the fact that the descriptive operations of photography are ubiquitous and dominant as an image form and that they participate in a wider sense in the saturation of the world of experience with pre-determined descriptions. Nothing of the sense of this world is gained without it already being written by others first, so to speak. Indeed, in its critical orientation, this does seem describable as a politically pessimistic account of the world disclosing form of the intersubjectively structured sphere of phenomenality that stands as the aesthetic aim of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Set within the critical framework of a politically oriented notion of the photograph as a problematic and mutable sign, it is a critically revisionist notion of photographic sequence that acts as a mediating structure at a number of levels for Sekula's attempt to derive a photographic art of critical realism.

This problematisation of photography's evidentially based "essential realism" locates Sekula's practice between two broadly conceived attitudes to documentary photography. On the one hand, he seeks to redeem core features of the tradition of social documentary photography; a task pursued through problematisation of historical categories, for example, articulating conflicting attitudes towards truth as objectivity and form as expressive value. On the other hand, he situates his account of photographic realism in an ambivalent but nevertheless intimate relation to the uses of documentary photography in artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s. The photographic artwork in Sekula's terms mounts its claims to social critique by thematising and refiguring categorially determined aspects of the experience of social space, but only insofar as this is facilitated by a critique of the conditions of the photographic artwork.

It is in the context of these remarks that the counterintuitive linkage established by the third epigram (from Merleau-Ponty's *Visible and Invisible*) to this discussion of Sekula can be understood.

It is a constant source of surprise and disappointment that interpretations of phenomenological texts insist upon treating any mention of 'things' as being simplistically limited to consideration of some form of already constituted, physically present and obvious object. In opposition to this tendency one can note that, in Merleau-Ponty's remarkable critique of the persistent idea of 'continuous' experiential temporality, 'things' can just as well be other states of affairs, (say, for instance, abstract concepts, situations, social practices, sentences, even the world in all its complexity as a pre-existing historical situation that demands to be taken up by each subject in it). To mention this in the current context is not a digression. Rather, it points towards the sense in which, if this is case (if the things that *have us* are not simply present objects in the crudest of senses) then what is indicated by the term 'things' must also refer to the *forms* of social life. One might, then, amend (slightly, but significantly and perhaps as a partial aspect of what his ontological claim might mean in concrete terms) Merleau-Ponty's observations on time, language and perception in the following manner: "the social forms have us, and that it is not we who have the the social forms", or perhaps even say that, "the photographs have us, and that it is not we who have the photographs". To simply insert these terms in Merleau-Ponty's mouth like this is far too crude, but nonetheless it promises to be illuminative. Similarly, to imply that Sekula's nuanced historical interventions are reducible to such a general claim might seem otiose. However, this rather brutal replacement projects into the foreground the sense in which one might make a connection between the problematisation of fundamentally idealist notions of continuous experienced temporality and the problematic character of

forgetting that interrupts it.[61] One might think of this relation as informing the phenomenological problem of experiencing history in a period when the historical seems to have been overtaken and saturated with the aesthetic. Forced, perhaps, into consideration at a socially concrete level, one might think of Merleau-Ponty's metaphoric reference to the diaphragm of a lens (*objectif* is the word he uses) as a figure of an illegitimate understanding, of a forgetting that doesn't even realise forgetting and not memory is its concern. If one were to take Sekula's expanded critique of technical metaphors such as this (and his rejection of ontologically oriented aesthetic theories) and to think the socially textured forms of use that characterise the images they evoke one might understand the integral moment of forgetting for memory as the temporal modality of a future that is forgotten. Here one can note an important expression of Sekula's concern for time as a problem of memory and forgetting: "What futures are promised? What futures are forgotten"?

Before considering what critical value this claim might have, it is necessary to explore in more detail the character of Sekula's existential theorisation of photography as this is pursued in and through his artworks. Before one can do this it is necessary to justify the claim that Sekula's art practice lays emphasis on the phenomenological character of its reception. It is in this context that one can note the problem posed by the last of the three epigrams to this section in which Merleau-Ponty gives some sense of what is at stake in the 'bad' form of forgetting that both he and Sekula criticise from

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[61] Here, with some reservations, one might note Mauro Carbone's account of the relation between memory and forgetting in the later Merleau-Ponty:

> [It is] the very distinction between space and time, which, in his opinion, is called into question in the horizon of brute being. [...] what Merleau-Ponty prefers now to define as the 'vortex' of our temporalisation-spatialisation—that is, our field of presence—in its gestaltist form. By placing transcendence in relief, in fact, this form can account for the discontinuous aspect of that field, or better, surpass the very opposition between continuity and discontinuity precisely in the figure-ground model. It thereby shows forgetting, just with that discontinuous character, as a 'manner of being to [...] in turning away from [...]' (*Visible and Invisible*, p. 196), that is as the reverse of memory, precisely according to the gestaltist relation which links the visible and the invisible [...].

Mauro Carbone, *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty's A-Philosophy*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2004, p. 8.

such different viewpoints. The forms of elision, ideological misrepresentation and inequality that Sekula criticises and attempts to overcome in his photographic art stand as general political problems that find their force in the historical situation that any phenomenology of photography (or any phenomenological aesthetics as such) would have to face up to; the fact that the fundamentally situated character of all experience of such problematic facts implies a general existential commonality. The form of this commonality in Sekula's project is asserted as the historical condition of life under capital in all its generalised negativity. As well as promising to articulate in detail the kinds of phenomenological commitments this entails (from the direction of Merleau-Ponty towards interpretation of Sekula, so to speak) it also promises to facilitate interpretation of the later writings of Merleau-Ponty in terms of the socio-historical and to avoid reducing these problematic spheres to questions of origin and logos.

Only a Language Experiment?

Jonathan Green devotes a chapter of his book on American photography (entitled, "Only a Language Experiment") to discussion of Sekula and Susan Sontag, who he claims, together, misrecognise the essentially "visual" character of the photograph in their socially critical stress on photography's discursive aspect. Green's historical reconstruction of American photography is underpinned by the Szarkowskian idea that photographs are analytic objects of aesthetic experience, more precisely, that in the form of aesthetic experience they provide the conceptual inheres within vision: "Like verbal thinking it [photography] occurs directly in the mind or the mind's eye. As such it is inherently a conceptual activity". Green sees Sekula and Sontag as "overloading" the experience of looking at photographs, neglecting the "visual result" of "the work as

object". He finds in their notion of photography that the "ideational" prevails over the "visual" and that this rests on a certain, "lack of faith in the analytical power of images in general and photographs in particular".[62] What this means for thinking about photography is made explicit in the conclusion Green draws. The social emphases orienting both critics' writings on photography are condensed into a question of the moral overdetermination of aesthetic judgement. It is the "moral efficacy" of the image as a site of ideological conflict that defines photography for them. In making this claim, Green collapses important differences between the two writers and reduces what they say about the political ramifications of social uses of photography to an aesthetic register. He also limits what the concept 'morality' might mean in such contexts.

> Their judgements are in essence anti-visual, inimical to the exercise of the visual imagination. The visual becomes subservient to the ideological, and the ideological can be manifest only in words and through the narrative of history. Sontag and Sekula have been deceived by the very failure of human sense awareness that McLuhan predicted: they have accepted the characteristics of one specific medium—language—as the model for thought, refusing the possibility that visual imagery, specifically photography, is also a road to reality and truth.[63]

The only point, at which both writers do not deny such visual truth, for Green, is when they indulge in autobiographical commentary; Sontag with the experience of seeing images of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau as a child, and Sekula in a series of

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[62] Green, *American Photography*, p. 193 and 199, respectively. Green's point here, is also similar to that made by the American cultural anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, who looks at perception with a marked emphasis on the findings of empirical psychology, where it veers towards appropriations of paintings and photographs vis-à-vis "how we see". In his essay about spatial perception and photography, "Visual Conventions and Conventional Vision" of 1987, Hall writes: "The better photographers don't try too much. When they focus attention on details of light, texture and colour, viewers are able to explore on their own and to experience the spaces as the photographer saw them, not as some machine recorded them." (in *Poetics of Space: A Critical Photographic Anthology*, ed. Steve Yates, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995, p. 123).

[63] Ibid., p. 200. Here one might make a distinction between Sekula and Sontag. The unremittingly pessimistic ethical slant of *On Photography* polarises issues of photography and truth in terms of lost forms of authentic experience, which appear degraded by the photographic image's ubiquity. Sekula's work, by contrast, could be called an interrogation of the continuing possibility of thinking such truth, in the form of a politics of use. Green's characterisation of ideology as something that requires expression in a narrowly conceived linguistic form facilitates reduction of what might be conceptual in aesthetic experience to a question of what is immanent to a form of subjective experience for which the social is not determining, as such issues of alienation, reification, ideology and politics in any strong sense are positioned as external to questions of what is seen and what it is to see.

artworks made during the early 1970s. Green criticises Sekula's *Meditations on a Triptych* (of 1974-78, figs. 16 & 17) writing that it, "transforms three snapshots into sociological observation and personal anecdote".[64]

Fig. 16: Allan Sekula, *Meditations on a Triptych*, 1978. (Document of its installation in the exhibition, *Performance Under Working Conditions*, at the Generali Foundation gallery, Vienna, 2003.)

The work comprises three images of Sekula's family posing in different locations, and the other, his mother and two sisters taken by Sekula around 1974 and a few years later combined with a quasi-autobiographical commentary. In exhibition the images are presented as small, highly coloured prints that are window mounted together in a single frame, a meter or so in front of which is positioned a plain table with the bound text and a chair. This work makes emphatic a critically attenuated phenomenology of photographic art. It is hard to see how (if understandable why) an otherwise sophisticated critic such as Green would not understand this. What appears unattractive to Green is the fact that the phenomenological here is turned to critically self-reflective ends. *Meditations on a Triptych* encourages a mixture of looking and reading that

[64] Ibid., p. 228.

interpenetrate each other as activities through which the viewer / reader may make explicit for themselves the character of the acts they are performing. What is interesting about this work is the claim that one is never purely either reader or viewer and that this openness is characterised explicitly in the form of the works display. All of the critical, explicitly linguistic aspects of the work are inscribed within its foregrounding of such issues.

Fig. 17: Allan Sekula,
Meditations on a Triptych
(detail), 1978.

The manifest critical articulation of the power and gender relations that are, for instance, foregrounded in the depiction and discussion of the image of Sekula's father in dress uniform posing alongside his mother and including the 'mistake' of showing the photographer's shadow under the foot of the father (not to mention the wider social and economic implications of these familial relations) are *all* mediated by the explicit structure of the phenomenological treatment of the situation of viewing.

From Romantic Existentialism to the Social Categories of Existence

One aspect of the recently renewed interest in Sekula's artwork has been an emphasis—exemplified by a recent retrospective exhibition, *Performance Under Working Conditions*—on Sekula's 'turn' towards the use of photography in the early 1970s.[65] Sekula describes this period as marked by a transition from the production of sculptures to the performance of a range of art events and actions influenced by his participation in political protest and their photographic documentation. His description focuses on three works made during the winter of 1971-72.

> The first of these projects was *Box Car*, which consisted of a photograph made from the open door of a rail-freight wagon as it passed a chemical research and development plant where I had worked as a technician more than two years earlier. The second was *Meat Mass*, which entailed shoplifting expensive steaks from a supermarket and throwing them under the wheels of freeway traffic while strolling in the traffic lanes. And the third was *Untitled Slide Sequence*, which documented from a pedestrian overpass the departure of workers from an aerospace factory at the end of the working day.[66]

Viewed as attempts to articulate a critical photographic-art practice these three works suggest that Sekula entertained a range of artistic strategies based in "models" of subjectivity that were projected performatively as framing devices for the formation of artworks. In the first, *Box Car*, Sekula adopts the identity of a transient, alienated drifter (fig. 18). In the second, *Meat Mass,* he performs as a petty criminal and absurd interventionist (figs. 19 & 20). In the third, *Untitled Slide Sequence*, he develops the themes of performance and its self-conscious structuring effect on the work, but turns the camera away from himself to intervene in an everyday situation and, specifically,

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[65] It is important to note that Sekula's earlier works have quite complex publication histories. Many have recently been exhibited for the first time and some have been republished in changed form. This reworking has tended to proceed in ways that I take to be shaped, in part at least, by recently renewed critical and curatorial interest in Sekula's work and also by his own (markedly self-conscious) attempts to retrospectively reconstruct his earlier career, recasting it in light of his more recent concerns.

[66] Sekula, *Performance Under Working Conditions*, p. 21, This exhibition displayed previously unpublished early works as well as more recent photo and video works. It was organised according to an emphasis on the theatricality of Sekula's earlier practice, which, as shall be seen in the following, he came later to qualify if not disavow.

the effects of capital driven rationalisation as it shapes the spaces and times of everyday experience (figs. 21-23). Sekula describes the impetus of these works, in the following manner:

> Early on I was trying to provoke a clash with large technical and economic systems. But action-art seemed to devolve into artistic self-aggrandisement. I became less interested in the petty criminal and transient as romantic disguises and more interested in documentation, especially the ambiguity of the documentary function and the aesthetic modesty and worldliness of the photograph. I was drawn to a very mundane idea of documentary: something very direct, uninflected by obvious aesthetic treatment. And I began to think hat it might be possible to photograph everyday life—leaving a factory, or housework—as if it were performance.[67]

The 'amateurish' qualities of the image bear upon the organisation of the space depicted and the time indicated through the negation of normative markers of quality. It is blurred, irregularly composed, self-consciously dull in tone and in what it depicts. The documentary function given the image and mediated by these qualities, introduces associations of transience and unemployment.

Fig. 18: Allan Sekula, *Box Car* (typewritten card) and photograph, 1971.

[67] Sekula, "Imaginary Economies", p. 241. The references in this last clause are to *Untitled Slide Sequence*, 1972, (discussed below) and the photographs of Sekula's family, especially his mother as she features in *Aerospace Folktales* of 1973.

The tensing of the caption structures what account it gives of the production of the picture it accompanies, locating both in a temporality that complicates their different mnemonic / reportorial operations. The "anchoring" function of the text remains relatively indeterminate. The casual or "de-skilled" strategies of representation that marked the stylistic development of the American tradition of documentary 'street' photography, especially, of the peripatetic model of the photographer as a 'drifter', exemplified by the early work of Robert Frank. Indeed, what one might call this work's strategic character bears an explicit relation to the heavily romanticised figure of the drifter and its stylistic photographic representation.[68]

Meat Mass indicates a move towards the construction of larger photographic sequences in order to develop such critical relations in narrative form. It is also, I many senses, far more brutal in form and critical interest than *Box Car. Meat Mass* comprises 12 photographs depicting two sets of events that are described in an extended caption, presented on a typewritten card that also gives the title and date of the work. A parallel is established here between text and images, similar to that in *Box Car*, though more extended in form; the caption comprises in two sentences (past tense and passive), which relate to the two stages of action depicted in the photographs.

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[68] For an interesting discussion of Frank's relation to Walker Evans, see Leslie Baier, "Visions of Fascination and Despair: The Relationship Between Walker Evans and Robert Frank", *Art Journal*, Spring, 1981, pp. 55-63. For a detailed discussion of Frank's practice and its relation to the tradition of American documentary photography in more general terms, see Lili Corbus-Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: From the New Deal to the Cold War*, Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, especially the chapter, "Robert Frank: The Only Game in Town?", pp. 175-218. See also Beaumont Newhall's discussion of Evans and Cartier-Bresson and his brief comments on Frank in, *The History of Photography: From 1939 to the Present*, (revised edition) New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1982, and Colin Westerbeck's account of post World-War Two street photography in America, "On the Road and in The Street" in Michel Frizot, ed., *A New History of Photography*, pp. 641-60. Also see, Jonathan Green's discussion of the explicit relations in question here in the chapter, "*The Americans*: Politics and Alienation", *American Photography*, pp. 81-94.

Fig. 19: Allan Sekula, *Meat Mass*, (title card and images 1 & 2), 1972.

The first three photographs draw on classic filmic (and maybe, more properly, comic book) strategies for establishing a context for narrative action. They situate the action in a branch of Safeway's and show a cabinet full of packaged, expensive cuts of meat. The first two images setting the scene for Sekula to act the shoplifter in the third. These images serve to establish and link obvious signifiers of luxury (a fashionable young woman parking her Porsche and the display of prime beef) that frame and contrast to Sekula's action. The manner in which they do so also emphasises the distinctive characteristic of narrative time in still photographic sequences.

The third image introduces more complex signifiers of the represented action into this context. Taken from directly outside the shop's exit—a highly reflective glass door marked 'out only'—it shows the figure of the longhaired, denim clad and rather furtive looking Sekula, walking towards the door: a petty criminal on the literal and legal threshold of his crime, filling out with descriptive detail as a claim on this 'present' action, the passive voice and the past tense of the caption. In the glass of the door one can see the reflection of the photographer, partially superimposed over Sekula, a

shopper with a grocery bag and behind her, the head of a man who looks towards the door. Sekula and the photographer are implicated in an event, which appears simultaneously banal and complex: not least because the task of photographing the theft / art action seems to have drawn attention to it in the very act of giving it material existence as an element of an artwork.

Fig. 20: Allan Sekula, *Meat Mass* (images 7 & 10), 1972.

These are composed in a manner that suggests anxiety and haste, using a skewed point of view and relative looseness with regard to the care or speed with which the images seem to have been made. Graphic signs, such as handfuls of meat and Sekula's posture of dramatic attention pre- (and post-) figure the actions he is supposed to perform. The cars and Sekula do not appear in the same image on the tarmac of the road, nor do we see the meat hit the vehicles, which emphasises the highly staged appearance of the sequence. The dramatisation of the danger he courts suggests that he is also only too subject to the threat of being reduced to the raw, fleshy state of the meat that he wastes so absurdly, yet the photographic signs and their placement in the sequence militate against this. The object of spatial dramatisation through which the temporal logic of the disjunctive set is Sekula the actor, his body and gestural expressions claiming the space of whatever the notion of critique might mean in the

photographically figured narrative artwork. The vertical, spatial oscillation that takes place between these images also finds register in the later work *Untitled Slide Sequence.* However, in this later work, the vertical shifting that occurs between images appears more regimented as an effect of a conceptual schema applied to the photographic apparatus according to which the work was produced as well as appearing to occupy a far more important place in the experience of the work as a slide projection.

These works stage the identity of the artist as paramount in different ways. They adopt stylistic devices from a variety of photographic sources through which to stage and record these performative acts. They also lay great emphasis on the rather romanticised figure of Sekula as the agent of critical possibility. In the third work described in the passage quoted above, *Untitled Slide Sequence*, Sekula develops the themes of performance and its self-conscious structuring effect on the artwork, but turns the camera away from himself to intervene in an everyday situation and, specifically, the effects of capital driven rationalisation as it shapes the spaces and times of everyday experience.

Untitled Slide Sequence consists of every picture Sekula made while he was standing at the top of the stairs leading to the exit from a large aerospace factory, whilst the shop-floor workers, administrators and management work. The images are accompanied by the caption: *End of shift. General Dynamics Convair Division aerospace factory, San Diego, California, 17 February 1972.*[69] The obvious documentary impulse of this work is structured by its relation to the themes and strategies of the social documentary tradition as well as finding key determinants of its form through relation to the use of photography in conceptual art practices. As its title makes obvious, *Untitled Slide Sequence* was made to be projected, locating it within a further set of critical and

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[69] *October*, No. 76, Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, Spring, 1996, p. 71.

material associations, notably those pertaining to the relative insubstantiality, temporal extension and impermanency of the images as they are set into a form of highly regulated cyclical repetition. It is (at least in its original form) installed along with an accompanying text, placed in a small "reading booth" set in the same wall onto which the images are projected. This calls to mind the strategic approach towards manipulating the space and time of display that has shaped many of Sekula's works: "Maintaining the liminality and openness and democratic potential of photography for me means always working with the mundane hybridity of three types of space: the picture gallery, the reading room, and the projection room".[70]

The projected character of the work allows Sekula to make a parallel between the slide sequence and the cinema with the claim that the work exists, "between still photography and cinema".[71] This connection stresses the manner in which *Untitled Slide Sequence* articulates a fragmented form of temporality: the paradoxical assertion of an unfolding experience of the fractured time of "disassembly"; a temporal form that resonates with the transitional character of the historical space the work depicts. The register of time in this formal relation to cinema foregrounds the 'cuts' in the sequence and this is deliberately emphasised to approach something of the spatio-temporalities determined by the categorical abstractions of labour and, in particular, the mystified distinction between the time of work and leisure. All of these conditions combine to

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[70] Allan Sekula, "Imaginary Economies", p. 248.

[71] Allan Sekula, "Imaginary Economies", p. 241. *Untitled Slide Sequence* adopts a critical relation to one particular movie, the Lumière Brothers' *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* of 1895. This film depicts workers leaving the brothers' own factory in Lyons and, in it, the largely female workforce spills out of the large wooden factory gates as they open. The camera is positioned across the street at the same level as the crowd, which flows like the moving image form through which one sees it, smoothly. Collectively, the workers perform a narrative event that relies on a sense of cinematic flux to suffuse the mundane event of leaving work, with interest. *Untitled Slide Sequence* takes the perceptually convincing, flowing artifice of filmic representation as registered in the Lumière Brother's film and, in a manner parasitic upon the conviction that this parallel "fits" the depicted experience, enacts its disassembly, extending the spaces and relations between the images.

mark the moment of leaving work *en mass* as a complex social event, represented without elevating it to the status of conventionally aestheticised "documentary truth". The fragmented and instrumentally channelled forms of experience it constructs form a "spectacle" through reference to cinematic time that stands as a critique of ideological assumptions regarding generalised and naturalising forms of the representation of experiential time. In this context, this work thematises Lukács' critical account of lived experience under the division of labour in *History and Class Consciousness.*

> Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not. As labour is progressively rationalised and mechanised his lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more *contemplative* [...] it reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space [...] Thus time sheds its qualitative, variable, flowing nature [...] in short it becomes space.[72]

Lukcás' criticism of the fragmentation of durational experience into instrumentally quantified factory time is generalised to give account of broader social conditions that degrade lived experience; a diagnosis that is not limited to time literally spent at work, but, according to the generalised logic of reification, inflects cultural experience also. In this context; "Time is everything, man is nothing; he is at most the incarnation of time. Quality no longer matters".[73] Thus, for Sekula: "The rhythm of the slide projector is the rhythm of the automated factory, but the individual frame individuates both the photographer and the subject".[74]

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[72] Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat", in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. R. Livingstone, London: Merlin Press, 1990. p. 88-9.
[73] Ibid., p. 88.
[74] Ibid., p. 241.

Fig. 21: Allan Sekula, *Untitled Slide Sequence*, (images 1-6), 1972.

The first fact to note is that like all such projection works shown in darkened gallery spaces, the viewer is set inside the expanded physical character of the images as they traverse the space to end on a screen or wall. With the original exhibition form of *Untitled Slide* Sequence, the perceptual immersion encouraged by this organisation of the space of display is alleviated by inclusion of a small, illuminated 'reading booth' set in the same wall onto which the images were projected. This booth contained a chair and an accompanying text concerning what the images depicted. One could adopt a

range of 'positions' in relation to the unfolding sequence. The experience of standing in the dark space and watching the automated repetition of the cycle of images never quite allowed a 'fully' immersive experience. The illuminated booth next to the screened images was lit and stood (whether empty or in use) as a part of the spectacle staged by dint of being a second illuminated object in the darkness. One would be able to see others occupying the space set out for them to read. This means that other audience members switched positions from being anonymous figures in the darkness, perhaps only partially illuminated, their attention directed towards the same object, to being a part of the spectacle. Sitting in the reading booth meant having stepped into the spectacle, so to speak, to become a visible object. But this also meant that insofar as they were, from this position unable to see the slide projection they modulated they're own relation to the progression of the images as they adopted the role of a reader.

One is confronted by the cyclical presentation of the large-scale figures of the workers leaving the factory (looking away or at the photographer and consequently the audience). In a documentary vein, the set up encourages one to engage with the cycle of images as a presentation of contents. The flashes of illumination are regularly timed and it is, indeed, difficult to avoid treating these images as a confrontation with the people depicted. Yet this manifest repetitive encounter with content is complicated considerably by the relation between the distinct forms of treatment of the spaces in which it unfolds.

Fig. 22: Allan Sekula, *Untitled Slide Sequence*, (images 6-7), 1972.

In order to follow the figures of the workers as the reach the top of the stairs and pass the photographer quite obviously moved the camera vertically and horizontally from his static position. These small shifts register in inverse form to characterise the spatial form of the images screened. The rectangular form of the projected light frames and presents the relatively banal background of the open spaces of the factory complex as the arena in which these relations between people take place. The space depicted appears as a quite highly illuminated channel through which the workers move towards the camera and viewer. As they 'approach' their bodies become darker areas that fill the image/screen abruptly and with increasing scale, whilst the space remaining behind them remains constant and bright. This movement towards the camera is made emphatic by the breaks in time between shots and the regular spacing of the slides as they change. The figures of the workers jump forward in a way that is disjunctive enough to make the situation seem artificial but also just smooth enough to have some sense of the perceptual characteristics of film. The effects generated by the lateral and vertical movements of the camera are significant as they serve to structure the arena in which these movements take place. As can be noted in the differences between images five and six in the sequence (the last two images in fig. 24) and six and seven (fig. 25) show minimal changes in the horizontal space of the image. There is an effect that derives from these that parallels and complicates the disjunctive sense of movement towards the

screen or the attenuated contrast with the flowing character of conventional film. The minimal narrative to be gleaned from this at the level of documentary content concerns the positioning of the photographer whose feet are planted at the top of the stairs and don't move, whilst his body twists and moves around to follow the people passing him by as they reach the top of the stairs. This is the form of the intervention into the everyday situation. Yet one is obviously constitutively distanced from these figures and their actions. Very obviously, the image remains static and flat on the wall in the gallery space. But this appearance of stasis is perceptually attenuated by the fact of the space being a projection room and the viewer an occupant of its interior. The lateral and vertical movements or changes between the images is also structured by these relations shift on a scale that remains congruent with that of architectural scale, whilst the figures of the workers' bodies are massively enlarged. The channel between the factory buildings swings its perspectival lines from left to right and up and down but, again obviously, without breaking the bounds or disrupting the stability of the rectangle of light on the wall.

A complex interplay between different forms of spatio-temporal relation is thus structuring of the work. The flatness of the screen remains consistent and carries the disjunctive narrative of workers leaving the factory. The construction of the time of this sequence is, as has often been noted, characterised by the tension between the senses of forward movement and movement toward the screen, which places a strong emphasis on the presentation of content.

Fig. 23 : Allan Sekula, *Untitled Slide Sequence* (images 16-9), 1972.

Russell Ferguson discusses *Untitled Slide Sequence*, in brief, in his survey of street based photography; *Open Street: Possibilities of the Street.* He remarks: "Its sequential nature denies the privilege normally given to the single image plucked from a contact sheet and yet at the same time it claims an importance for each image in the series. All the moments are equally decisive".[75] As a principle of formation, the predetermined order establishes a critical relation to the discourse of aesthetic value attributed to selective aesthetic judgements, as they weigh on individual images in the tradition of documentary photography. A moment of literal and externally determined material and formal equality is inscribed into the work. The making explicit of such external determinations draws critical attention towards their normative and conventionally "hidden" function in conventional documentary photography.

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[75] Russell Fergusson, *Open City: Street Photography Since 1950,* Oxford: MOMA, 2001, p. 16.

> The sequential presentation also challenges conventional ideas of composition [...] The question of "art" photography, however, is not Sekula's concern [...] The constant repetition of the slide sequence not only echoes the repetitive labour of the workers depicted, but calls on the viewer to cultivate an attention to the details of Sekula's documentation, which is of an explicitly working class space.[76]

The rejection of the kinds of claim made for documentary photography's "art status" is a recurrent critical theme for Sekula. Ferguson's narrowly defined notion of photographic-art is misplaced, yet his comment remains interesting. Sekula's negation of claims for documentary as art customarily takes the following form: "Documentary is thought to be art when it transcends its reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression on the part of the artist".[77] Ferguson's formulation of Sekula's position misrecognises a crucial shift away from the transcendental claim to the art status of documentary photograph and towards a challenge to the conceptualisation of art as a question of self-expression. Ferguson's comment is worthy of note because in it, the object of critique—the 'art' conception of photographic documentary practice—and the critical alternative that Sekula develops, collide. *Untitled Slide Sequence* projects a tendentious claim on its status as an artwork that finds justification in a critical evaluation of its conceptual-technical depiction of "working class space".

Here one finds a register of the stress on the vernacular that Fried and Elkins criticise in Barthes conception of the photograph, but it is one that is formally articulated as a complex set of instrumental relations that play themselves out in terms of the rigidly formalised conditions of the work's display. The confrontation with the look of another is divorced from the conditions they suppose to facilitate the form of reflective activity that allows the punctum effects such photographs produce to occur. There is no time to reflect or to have a rounded aesthetic experience of each image in its projection, only in

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[76] Ibid.

[77] Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism", in *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973 – 1983*, Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art, 1984, p. 58.

the versions published in book form. Whatever narrative of movement there is, is illusory in a brutally simple fashion when this work is projected large. The sequential progress of these figures towards the viewer is an effect of the flashing up of larger and larger areas of more or less dark tone against the light of the background. They are, so to speak, literalised as gestalt forms in a number of ways. At the level of contrast between figure and ground they coalesce to form readable depictions of social space by relative scalar values and distinctions in tone and colour. The changes that take place in these scalar relations as they alter in abrupt changes from slide to slide recall something of Merleau-Ponty's notion of film as a temporal gestalt, unfolding its melodic unity for the viewer by dint of the thematisation of narrative sense as well as the abiding identity of forms of meaningful movement. Yet, this is filmic time sliced up and rendered disjunctive. The temporal form of the extensive gestalt is rendered with enough consistency to appear as such, but in highly attenuated perceptual form.

One is not given the opportunity to dwell on these images as they change and assert themselves rigorously as an automated sequence. The figures and the space they occupy appear abruptly and not for long as faces and as identifiable social types but also as areas of tonal contrast and relative illumination. The space in which they walk is also subject to the same effects of repetition, but with different results. It tends to remain constant as the space in which these contents and areas of light and dark flare up, vanish and change in sequential order. The space of the action is thematised as an enclosure that bounds movement as a possibility for these people and saturates it with social meaning of a mundane kind. It is, in terms of the narrative content one might assume here, a space that is rigid and unchanging, the bad term, perhaps in the dialectics of this set of social relations. Yet this space is mutable and mobile also. There are distinct contrasts between the shifting horizontal and vertical movement in the progression of

images, marked by the manner in which they inform one of the space depicted and the fact that whatever movements there are their find themselves restricted to the unmoving and unchanging shape of the screened image's rectangle. This evokes a tension between the saturation of this mundane space with light and its restrictive function for the movements depicted.

I stress the description of the work's projected form to make emphatic something that, in less clear form, is true of all experiences of looking at photographs. Again this observation seems frighteningly naive in the context. The various means by which different photographic forms and conventions present compelling realistic representations are taken up as possibilities by embodied perceiving subjects at large in the world that forms their environment. When I noted this earlier it was at a level of phenomenological generality that justified calling it naive. In the present context, however, this claim is far more clearly articulated as making social, historical, aesthetic and critical sense. This is the point of relation between the phenomenological account of Melreau-Ponty given earlier and the current discussion of Sekula. The projected form of *Untitled Slide Sequence* offers itself to such phenomenological description and understanding as it explicitly and clearly sets out to construct an environment that attempts to gain some critical descriptive purchase on the social situation depicted by manipulation of different modes of structured perceptual experience that are possible for its viewers. This claim also applies to less obviously phenomenologically distinctive situations and photographic works.

Fish Story and the Phenomenological Conditions of Critical Photographic-Art

First shown as a whole in 1995, *Fish Story* is the product of six years intermittent world travel taking in Los Angeles, San Diego, Gdansk, Warsaw, Seoul, Vigo, Veracruz and Hong Kong as well as a trans-Atlantic journey onboard a container ship between New Jersey and Rotterdam. The resulting selection of images is grouped in seven main sequences connected geographically and by maritime traffic flows. When exhibited it comprises 105 framed colour prints, interspersed with 26 photographically reproduced text panels. Beside these, two sequences of continuously projected transparencies are shown in adjacent booths with accompanying reading material. The images from these sequences are omitted from the book, which also differs in the inclusion of an extended, two part essay presenting a wide-ranging history of representations of the maritime world since the seventeenth century. In a symposium on *Fish Story*, Sekula described its relation to the trajectory of his career: "Fish Story, and my earlier work going back to 1972/73, can be characterized as a hybrid, "paraliterary" revision of social documentary photography [...]. Over time, I have increasingly tried to dissolve the boundary between essay writing, a "poetics" of sequenced descriptive photographs, and the practices of research in cultural, economic and social history".[78]

Fish Story deals with themes of social documentary form as a strategic mode of problematising the already culturally overdetermined sphere of existential relations of spatiality. It comprises a rather complex framework in which the critically attenuated aesthetics of single evocative documentary photograph can operate within the bracketed relations set up by their neighbouring images and the thematic cross references to issues

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[78] Allan Sekula, On "Fish Story": The Coffin Learns to Dance, *Camera Austria*, Nos. 59 / 60, 1997.

of maritime social space that resonate throughout the work. One can take, for example, one image of a fire in a ramshackle one-storey store in Los Angeles (fig. 24).

Fig. 24, Allan Sekula, *Koreatown, Los Angeles*, April 1992.

In this image the rosy glow of the advertising background echoes ironically in the destruction of the shop by fire and seems to infer some kind of physical relation between the two. The associations of comfort, luxury and desirability this atmosphere might have provided as a background to the woman looking still directly at one, despite her fate abide but are linked to the less rosy fate of the establishment that literally supports her. Real smoke and a smokey simulacrum compete as registers of what is being depicted and they do so in distinctly aesthetic terms. This heavily aestheticised social space is treat to a corollary form of aestheticisation to draw it out and make it obvious. Indeed, this theme of aestheticisation of this particular social space carries on throughout the sequence to which this image belongs. It is preceded by a range of images that register one of the core critical themes of the work; the fact that lives are

shaped by their vulnerability in the face of the movements of capital, its ability to uproot itself and move across the world to follow profit.

This theme of the transformations wrought by movements of capital is further articulated in terms of the re-use of abandoned industrial space by film producers (figs. 25 and 26). In the former image one can see the rather deliberately poignant intervention made by the photographer as he discovers a welders workbench abandoned for two years and still bearing a spanner in the position it was left on, presumably, the day the workplace closed. In the latter image, an abandoned warehouse space is shown after having been further used and later abandoned by a film crew who have left behind an incongruent painting of two gentlewomen playing musical instruments.

Figs. 25 (left) and 26 (right), Allan Sekula, *Welder's booth in bankrupt Todd Shipyard, two years after closing, Los Angeles harbour, San Pedro, California, July 1991*; and, *Remnants of a movie set, abandoned shipyard, Los Angeles harbour, Terminal Island, California, January 1993.*

Prior to this pairing of images of loss and ironic change, two images of pipe-fitters working in the cramped interior of a boat under repair. Obvious contrasts between the viability and ongoing character of the forms of labour depicted are resonant, as are a

series of registers of conventional photographic modes of their representation. These are revealed through the emphasis on the aesthetic character of the fact of depiction as this might be said to romanticise labour and the lost conditions of a viable working life. One of the major tropes that relates these images is pathos. The highly romantic aesthetic of lost time in the image showing a spanner moved to reveal the dust that has gathered on the abandoned bench upon which it rests (and another workspace now an empty husk to be occupied by the entertainment industry) are contrasted with the images of one pipe-fitter reaching his arm out of shot in a gesture that may well be one in which he picks up a spanner to fix the joint he holds with his other hand.

Fig. 27: Allan Sekula, *Pipe-fitters finishing the engine room of a tuna-fishing boat, Campbell Shipyard, San Diego harbour*, January 1993.

Fig. 28: Allan Sekula, *Testing robot truck designed to move containers within automated ECT/Sea-Land cargo terminal, Maasvlakte, Port of Rotterdam, the Netherlands*, September 1992

Fig. 29: Allan Sekula, *Shipyard workers' housing, built during the Second World War, being moved from San Pedro to South-Central Los Angeles*, May 1990.

Fig. 30: Allan Sekula, *the rechristened* Exxon Valdez *awaiting sea trials after repairs, National Steel and Shipbuilding Company, san Diego harbour*, August 1990.

These images of the relation between human scale and activity are set in relation to the massive ships and spaces that facilitate the movement of containerised goods and developments towards their automation and rationalisation. These contrasts present a range of more or less complex, brutal and subtle associative relations.

The manner in which this work presents a critique of the global cultures of capitalism has tended to be accepted at face value in its critical reception in ways that elide the critical problematisation of the conditions of documentary truth that the work performs. This is, indeed, the critical intent of the work. However, as Homi Bhabha puts it in a recent discussion of the possibility of conceptualising democracy in the face of

Capitalist globalisation: "Sekula's work has been read as a harsh critique of global capitalism in the documentary tradition, the most direct and directive of committed art. What such readings end up commending, congruent with Sekula's critique, is his radical view of the contradictions of late capitalism".[79] Bhabha's point is that such "direct" reception of the critical impetus of *Fish Story*, runs the risk of misrecognising the ways in which it problematises not only the ideological effects of its manifest object of critique, but the uncritical forms of cultural opposition that are heavily determined and, in fact, suggested by it. *Fish Story* problematises the possibility of the photographic mediation of critical truth claims as it attempts to make them. As Buchloh describes it in his essay accompanying the published version of this work:

> The syntagmatic dimension which Sekula aims to generate in the multiplicity of voices and photographic conventions that operate simultaneously in *Fish Story* is one that operates primarily within its own structure rather than as another incident of intertextuality within the complex history of modernism. In other words, an intertextuality that—rather than addressing its discursivity—addresses the construction of experience and memory in the dialogue with the reader/viewer.[80]

In his brief comments upon *Fish Story* Bhabha is one of few critics to have noted the formal sophistication with which it approaches the task of thinking photography as social critique. Bhabha's essay focuses on what he calls the "double horizon" that emerges in the experience of the relation between the transitional, "space-and-time frames that constitute the cultural as a practice that can both signify and survive the turning points of history and its transitional subjects and objects". In this context he articulates the idea of a "double horizon" as, on the one hand, the pragmatic acceptance

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[79] Homi K. Bhabha, "Democracy De-realised", in *Democracy Unrealised: Documenta 11_Platform 1*, ed. Okwui Enwezor, Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash and Octavio Zaya, Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2002, pp. 357-8. This essay is Bhabha's contribution to the internationally extended form of Documenta 11 that took place over a period of months in diverse locations around the world as five "Platforms". "Democracy Unrealised" (Platform 1) was held in Vienna March 15 – April 20, 2001, and Berlin October 9 – 30, 2001. For a critical review of Documenta 11—one of the very few that considered its extensive form as an event as an intervention into debates on globalisation seriously—see Stewart Martin, "A New World Art? Documenting Documenta 11", in *Radical Philosophy*, no. 122, November / December 2003, pp. 7-19.

[80] Buchloh, "Allan Sekula: Photography Between Discourse and Document", p. 200.

of "constitutions, laws, policies, legal regulations and reasoning". On this side of the horizon, "one takes the world as one finds it and actively sets out to adjudicate it".[81] On the other side, the very fixity of such conditions, in their global generality, present an ethical claim or challenge (for instance, as an interpretative and ethical horizon of internationally projected "human rights"). For Bhabha, this notion of double horizon is contingent and fragile, yet it also implies, "a potential [third] space of indeterminate living". He takes *Fish Story* to be emblematic of the critical and anticipatory form of this double horizon. Notably, it is the relation between a specific image and the formation of the whole work as a critical project, that Bhabha seizes upon as emblematic. Such relations are explicitly thematised in *Fish Story*, as, for instance in the way it charts the development of military, economic and mass cultural aspects of modernity through the relationships between the panoramic form of an earlier historical imaginary of the sea and the way these have been supplanted by a generalised logic of emphasis upon the detail in modern forms of rationalisation. In this context:

> Modernity entails a maritime victory of the detail over the panorama: these details circulate within the generalised stream of consumption, can be activated in any context. The sea is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, but only in decantable quantities. But under conditions of social crisis—war, mass exodus, environmental disaster—the bottle of representation can burst.[82]

But Bhabha's notion of a double horizon in its emphasis upon reading *Fish Story* as a model of intertextuality for global ethical demands under contemporary conditions of capitalism rushes, I feel, to dismiss the intransigence of the socially critical moments in Sekula's manipulations of documentary photography as an aesthetic possibility. Consider, for instance the juxtaposition of images that thematise memory, (figs. 31 & 32) as in those depicting the unemployed couple Mike and Mary, who survive by

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[81] Bhabha, "Democracy Unrealised", p. 355.

[82] Sekula, *Fish Story*, p. 107. The title of the section from which this quotation is taken is, "From the Panorama to the Detail", pp. 106-112.

scavenging on the docks of Los Angeles and a chair stored in the basement storeroom of a local museum.

Fig. 31: Allan Sekula, *Mike and Mary, and unemployed couple who survive by scavenging and who, from time to time, seek shelter in empty containers, South-Central Los Angeles*, August 1994.

The dignity with which this pair are depicted is frank and telling in its contrast with the image of a chair especially designed for now demolished shipyard workers housing. This last is now a museum piece, a record of local history, preserved and awaiting its possible display as a preserved aspect of social history. Mike and Mary are also, by implication, subject to a parallel but differently oriented question of remembrance and forgetting. Smaller details complicate the relation between these images and thematise the problematic temporality of what concrete instances of such discontinuous memory might be. One might note the golden figure of a woman sitting on a beach in an ecstatic moment of tourist splendour and as a souvenir, perhaps, of a holiday destination visited or not. This stands in marked contrast with the painting of a seated female figure representing in romantic style the muse of memory, Clio, on the door of the cupboard stored along with the modernist chair.

Fig. 32: Allan Sekula, *Chair designed for since demolished Channel Heights shipyard-workers housing in San Pedro, 1943, architect, Richard Neutra, decorative arts collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art.*

The paraliterary character of this construction of sequences is more explicit and more subtle than the self-consciously brutal form of organisation of *Untitled Slide Sequence*. It is, however, still understandable as an emphatic claim on the phenomenological character of photographic experience. In the terms of *Fish Story* the emphasis on site, on location and on the manipulation of aesthetic experience are shifted in reference to the entire world encompassed by the economic, political and historical processes and forms described in the relations between images and text. The phenomenological character of photographic representation reaches, with this work, an emphatic re-location of its terms. No longer is it a spatial simulation of the external or extra artistic spaces and conventions of social life. Rather, it is as a claim on the encultured, politically problematic and extensive form of critical description as such that photography features here. In a sense, the phenomenological texture of photography as it is critically re-articulated is seen to be an aspect of the world as the forms of reproduction of its social forms have come to occupy what might previously have been thought of as the intellectually and aesthetically separable sphere of art. Here one might note Sekula's description of another work, *TITANICs wake*, of 2000:

> *TITANICs wake* demonstrates that a simple visual diary of the last two years of the twentieth century can suggest the epic sweep and resonance of a historical novel, and without departing from the pictorial possibilities of careful documentary photography. One key to this possibility is the recognition that a landscape or a city can be photographed and verbally described in ways that acknowledge prior seizures by novelistic language, or by more recent cultural forms like the Hollywood epic, forms that are themselves indebted to novelistic realism. Documentary in this sense, must be a *literate* practice.[83]

In his earlier, more straightforwardly documentary works, arguably, this sentiment and its relation to the construction of complex and more or less unified aesthetic wholes was determining. With *Fish Story* the emphasis shifts so that the existential character of the frame of descriptive reference becomes more emphatically an experience of 'world' that is perhaps historically novel. This is the phenomenological form of the notion of photographic art projected by Sekula's recent work. By way of conclusion the complexity of this notion can be articulated in more detail through examination of one sequence from *Fish Story*.

Message in a Bottle

The sequence entitled, "Message in a Bottle" comprises six images accompanied by a short text and a set of captions. The text elaborates on the manner in which the port of Vigo (on the Galician coast of Spain) is represented, or rather not represented, in Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.* The images depict, respectively, the window of a jewellers and a clothes shop on Vigo's *Rúa Príncipe*, women handling fish on a quayside, men working in a ship's hold, people gathering after a trade union demonstration and trawlermen hauling a net onto a fishing boat at night (figs. 33 to 38). Both of the images that open the sequence use familiar techniques (such as an oblique camera angle, natural light and the reflections these generate in plate glass), to show the conditions of viewing the contents of shop windows.

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[83] Allan Sekula, *TITANICs wake*, Tours: Le Point de Jour Éditeur, 2003, p. 107.

Fig. 33 : Allan Sekula, *Jewellery store. Rúa Príncipe*, 1995.

Fig. 34: Allan Sekula, *Shop occupied by women clerks for eighteen months in dispute over pay. Rúa Príncipe*, 1995.

Fig. 35: Allan Sekula, *Fish-market women at the close of the morning auction. Puerto Pesquero*, 1995.

Fig. 36: Allan Sekula, *Dockers unloading shipload of frozen fish from Argentina*, 1995.

Fig. 37: Allan Sekula, *Workers gathering on the waterfront at the end of a nationwide general strike opposing the Socialist government's cutbacks in unemployment benefits*, 1995.

Fig. 38: Allan Sekula, *Unsuccessful fishing for sardines off the Portuguese coast*, 1992.

In the first image (fig. 33) a man parts the curtains dividing the window from the interior of the shop. His hands are highlighted by strong sunlight and they hold the base of an ornate silver model of a galleon. He does so delicately, without touching the ship's polished surfaces. The edges of the window are cut off by the frame of the photograph, almost completely compacting its surface with that of the print, an effect of absorption only disturbed by the slant of the display shelf and the way it indicates the angle of shot.

The second image (fig. 34) depicts a shabby window containing a display of women's clothing. In contrast to the first, it shows elements of the window frame and surrounding street. Cracks in the glass are clumsily patched with decorative tape, which also forms a neat border around the display's pelmet and has been used to secure a large, handwritten sign to the inside of the front pane. Another, smaller sign (a photocopy of a newspaper article) hangs next to this. The caption to this image offers a summary translation of these signs, through which one learns that the female clerks who work in the shop have occupied it for eighteen months in a dispute over pay.[84] The distance from which we see this window contrasts to the sense of absorption in the surface of the former image. This contrast appears to thematise one's possible relation to what is displayed, mediating the fascinations of the commodity form in terms of the effects of material absorption or distancing at work in both images and stressing the differences between the situations depicted, the smoothness or the disruption of the spatial organisations that facilitate the experience of the commodities on view.

The "animate" and "inanimate" gazes that play across the situations depicted are complex. A mannequin sits on the floor of the clothes display, positioned to direct its eyes towards anyone who might look in the window, an arrangement that is disrupted by the sign announcing the length of the shop's occupation. This situation is shown to

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[84] Allan Sekula, *Fish Story*, p. 148.

have been previously represented by the newspaper photographer who has depicted this same relation between mannequin and possible consumer as interrupted by the larger sign, in the photocopied newspaper article. The situation Sekula represents has literally been worked over before, but for a different purpose. The compounded spatial and temporal displacements produced here are further articulated by the reflected figure of someone who stands in front of the window, but is only visible in reflection and whose head is cut off by the large sign. A similar figure is also reflected in the jewellery shop window. Again, its head is obscured, and the body of this reflection seems to occupy an odd spatial position, oscillating between the flat space of the print's surface and the receding space of the display window. The head of this figure disappears in the reflected red surfaces of the ship's polished hull. Yet another, more distorted, reflection of this same body is visible in the billowing mainsail. It appears to stand alongside the photographer who can just be seen holding the camera to his eye.

One might, following the suggestive visual trail of these descriptive complexities, say that the ship is a figure that seems to gather all of these "reflections" onto its static surfaces. One might further note that it is itself frozen in a mimesis of movement powered by the wind, an observation that leads back to the lengthy exposition of historic transformations in maritime technologies elaborated in Sekula's essay.

The first two images are followed by four that present a condensed narrative of working life in the contemporary port and foreground issues of labour (figs. 35-8). They depict exemplary moments in the lives of Vigo's inhabitants. The way in which they present these social "facts" is rich and poetically inflected. The care of the documentarist is articulated within a set of intricate relationships providing a range of modes of narrative commentary, that are set up by the preceding images and the accompanying text and rebound back and forth through the sequence and the book as a

whole. These relationships establish the "literate" character of the images as documents, in particular by positioning *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* as an example of the "prior seizure" of Vigo by "novelistic language".

One can note what is, perhaps, an emblematic figure of the para-literary that emerges here—the concatenation of the camera and the library as a development of Sekula's concern for the institutional / material spaces of photographic mediation. The text of "Message in a Bottle" gives a brief account of the disjunctive relations between Verne's novel, the history of the port, and enigmatic signs of the lived reality of contemporary Vigo, which turns on the fact that the incredible wealth disposed of by Captain Nemo in the story comes from treasure sunk with a scuppered Spanish fleet that lies on the floor of Vigo bay. The novel's narrator discovers the source of Captain Nemo's apparently unlimited wealth: the sunken treasure on the bottom of Vigo Bay.[85] Sekula's commentary on this passage is itself inflected by a modern critique of Nemo's relation to Vigo, written by Xose Luis Mendez Ferrín a Galician writer.[86] Sekula notes that Verne's novel is replete with descriptions of underwater wonders, both natural and technological. Its descriptive richness implies that there is nothing outside of the combination of nature and technology that is not available to description, nothing that is not, in principle visible.[87] Yet Verne never, as Sekula points out, explicitly describes the source of Nemo's wealth. The narrator elaborates the experience of seeing many other similar sights in encyclopaedic detail. Yet, the treasure—which has the crucial narrative function of granting Verne the licence to achieve his imaginative inventions and of

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[85] Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, trans. H. Frith, London: Everyman's Library, 1908, reprint 1992, p. 189-90.

[86] Xose Luis Mendez Ferrín, *Dialogue between Lampetusa and Sponsor: On the Face and Reverse of the Town of Vigo*, as quoted in, *Fish Story*, p. 141.

[87] R. Barthes, 'Mythologies', *The Nautilus and the Drunken Boat*, [p65-67]. Barthes describes the world created by Verne as follows: "Verne had an obsession for plenitude: he never stopped putting a last touch to the world and furnishing it, making it full with an egg-like fullness", p. 65

providing Nemo the material basis of the power to pursue his dystopic aims—remains peculiarly invisible. It is only described as the object of the actions of Nemo's crew, gathering the barrels and chests of gold and silver from the sea floor, whilst Nemo and Dr Aronnax watch and Nemo recounts the historical tale of the fate of a fleet of treasure laden Spanish ships scuppered by their commander at the point where their French and English enemies were about to capture them. This "sunken treasury", Sekula writes, remains "invisible and frozen in its connection to historic plunder" and as such, its frozen state reveals its relation to what he reminds us, Marx called "primitive accumulation". Nemo is able to pursue his, basically aristocratic, yet revolutionary activities due to the availability of this form of wealth, which is historically anachronistic and retrospectively founding. The anachronism of this image of wealth is not lost on Ferrín, whose commentary locates the invisibility of the real town of Vigo in the novel as an indicator of Nemo's aristocratic nihilism. As a figure he is emblematic of the wealth that, "always leaves Vigo", that passes through the labouring hands of the ports inhabitants, who in Verne's terms would work the ships that "continuously ploughed" the Atlantic, revealing it to be "A magnificent plain" the surface of which is busy with maritime traffic.[88]

To return to the epigram from Merleau-Ponty's *Visible and Invisible*, one can read this remarkably rich concatenation of the paraliterary documents of Vigo as an instance of the reorientation of the notion of forgetting. Both Sekula and Merleau-Ponty seem committed to the facticity of events and their propensity to be misrecognised or to disappear, as they might be caught, however problematically in the descriptive net of documentary image and critical textual description or the ontological elaboration of a theory of discontinuous time. Here, forgetting is the critically won aesthetic of

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[88] Jules Verne, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, in the section "Vigo Bay", p. 244.

problematic photographic form insofar as it stages forgetting as the condition of memory and, in its turn, this relation as descriptive of experiential time. In the ontological register of lived time, forgetting is not the "removal of effective stimuli", but rather the structure of remembrance. Searching for a concrete register of what this might mean, one might insist that Sekula's treatment of documentary facts as aesthetic problems, with its emphasis on the phenomenological trails of reference and association between image and text and the world in which they are entwined.

Here one can take the paraliterary to be a strategy through which Sekula confronts the problem that haunts his sophisticated and integral critical practice, namely, that of the tension between dialectically structured plural relations between interpretive claims and meaningful critical possibilities on the one hand, and the singular form of the authorial intentionality that structures them into wholes that, no matter how complex, still stand as claims on the totality of the relations established. As in the discussion of *Untitled Slide Sequence* the conceptual element of the sequential structure is informed by the Lukácsian thesis of the totalising operations of capital upon lived experience. However, the value of this critical thesis of rationalisation and reification depends upon being able to adopt precisely the kind of critical perspective on aesthetically formed totality that Sekula's theorisation of photographic signification rules out of court. His efforts to articulate less and less didactic and more and more aesthetically complex works as formal claims on the notion of the photographic artwork evidence his self-consciousness of this as a problem.

It is in the stress on the tension between the existential theorisation of photography as inherently descriptive of socially specific life-worlds, on the one hand, and the manner in which this commitment is thematised in terms of stringently attenuated and problematic claims on the phenomenological forms of organisation of photographs in

critical artworks, on the other hand, that one might find, through a counterintuitive Merleau-Pontian reading, a way out of this dilemma.

The question of totality is thematised in terms of the aesthetic relation between an artistically constructed critical experience and a critically revealed social realm saturated with what art might have been taken to be. This is a conceptual problem that can be described in terms of the relation of reversibility thematised as structuring linguistic, perceptual, historical and social terms of worldly relation by Merleau-Ponty's conception of reversibility. Recall the forms of dehiscence and completion that are thematised in his early and later uses of the term and the manner in which these proved applicable to description of the technically mediated yet phenomenologically specified character of Mel Bochner and Ketty La Rocca's photographic works. Sekula's thematisation of photographic totality is perhaps the most sophisticated available, yet this fundamental tension in it has led to its misrecognition and has encouraged misunderstanding of its existential claims. There is, perhaps, a further, dialectical relation one might draw attention to between the phenomenological character of its claim to stand as a specifically photographic art and the only loosely thematised character of the form of operational thinking that Merleau-Ponty's aesthetics lead him to warn against. The two, thought together as structuring or revealing an art critical/phenomenological problematic compliment and promise to salvage what is of value and interest in each other. Sekula's theorisation of photography as photographic art, in this context, stands as a much more sophisticated and theoretically complex version of the kind of problem of the phenomenology of mediated desire in technological modernity that has been seen to structure Barthes' eidetic phenomenology of the photograph. A reading of Sekula inflected with Merleau-Pontian themes offers a

far more socially and historically specific and concrete perspective on mass cultural form.

CONCLUSION

This attempt to write a phenomenology of photography discovered at its beginning that the discursive space it seeks to occupy is widely presumed to be exhausted by *Camera Lucida* and, furthermore, that though this essay is characterisable as an explicit phenomenological inquiry into photography, it remains deeply problematic (precisely to the extent that it can be so described). Analysis of the manner in which Barthes' structures his inquiry according to the methodological appropriation of a fictionalised notion of phenomenology allowed critical articulation of the eidetic character of the notion of temporality underlying his celebrated and much used 'photographic concepts' and was also seen to compromise use of these concepts as phenomenological supplements to discursive theorisations of cultural identity. From this analysis emerged a sense that it is the specific manner in which Barthes claims to have identified the melancholic form of pastness, loss and death as the essence of photographic temporality which is the most problematic aspect of his essay, but that also suggests the possibility of refiguring key aspects of it according

eidetic character might be rethought in terms of the range of mediate and ambiguous, but socially concrete forms of spatio-temporal and embodied experience that remain underthematised in this study and critically neglected in its subsequent reception.

Analysis of *Camera Lucida's* critically neglected debt to Sartre's phenomenological psychology showed Barthes's radicalisation of photographic evidence (in the concept of reference) and its correlative term, the assertion of the banality of mass cultural form, to be facilitated by a frankly methodological analogy between phenomenological philosophy and the presumed fate of significant aesthetic experience in mass cultural modernity. Barthes's

facilitated by a frankly methodological analogy between phenomenological philosophy and the presumed fate of significant aesthetic experience in mass cultural modernity. Barthes's

critique of mass culture was seen to proceed by characterising it as a historically instrumental form of intentionality. This involved the outright rejection of artistic uses of photography that might themselves attempt to attain critical purchase on the specificity of their technological condition. Barthes's attempt to salvage a mode of affective specificity from this sphere, seen as wholly saturated by alienating forms of manifest intention, committed him to a radical temporal formalism in his conceptualisation of technologically mediated desire. This is expressed through the 'one-sided' paradox of the impossible-possibility that desire might be conceptualised as *noesis* without *noema*. It was with the set of claims deriving from this figure that the critically anticipated problems of Barthes's eidetic theorisation of photographic time became most evident.

However, examination of this aspect of his study also suggested a way of continuing reflection on the possible character of a more socio-historically reflexive phenomenology of photography. The clue to this was found in the range of conceptual figures around which Barthes organised his discussion (for instance, the relation skin/light/emulsion and that pertaining structurally between fictionalised intentionality and an interminable, externalised process of reduction). Through this critical-phenomenological reconstruction of *Camera Lucida* it emerged that the range of celebrated concepts Barthes articulates (most notably the *studium / punctum* relation) are underpinned by a more general thematisation of the temporal form of adventure (that promises much as a concept with which to account for nascent meaning in photographic culture) and the (at least implicitly spatialised and suggestively embodied) form of adherence, or stickiness.

These concepts pointed towards key aspects of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as a model for further critical inquiry into the value and possibility of a phenomenological

account of photography. Of special interest were his distinctive critique of Husserl's notion of intentionality and his privileging of the notion of an interminable reduction and the manner in which these themes characterise the centrality of art in Merleau-Ponty's thought.

In order to articulate a Merleau-Pontian theorisation of photography on the basis of such considerations it was necessary to work through key aspects of his aesthetic theory, which are explicitly structured by negation of photography as a technical image form. An account of the reception of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in cultural criticism and art practices offered a way of considering photographic practices as critically instituted claims on the concept of art. This discussion clarified the manner in which a Merleau-Pontian theory of photography might stand as inherently critical in relation to more obvious appeals to his philosophy in art criticism and art historical discourse. The important shift thus suggested concerned the manner in which certain photographic practices thematised embodied perception and intersubjective relations as inherently ambiguous, perceptual relations that demand examination in terms of an existential phenomenology of perception, but that also appear, historically, to be entwined with or mediated by technological form. The inference drawn from analysis of *Camera Lucida*, that Barthes effectively posits embodied perception (as split by its articulation across laminate and fleshy 'worlds') was expanded and articulated in terms of the problematic relation between Merleau-Ponty's earlier theorisation of the existential character of socially articulated perceptual experience (which was seen to rest on the core notion of perceptual reversibility, but in historically delimited form) and his later ontological radicalisation of perception in terms of the fleshy character of the primordially reversible relation between the visible and invisible.

Whilst the attempt to articulate further the notion of a Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of photography did not suggest a simple or direct, general articulation of photography as such, it did, through critical consideration of the fate of his ideas in relation to recent and contemporary art practices, suggest the critically intriguing possibility that there exists a parallel between his own account of art and photography and later, critically articulated, art practices.

It was in these terms that analysis of Emilio Prini's treatment of relations between body and world was pursued (in light of the fact that his practice is conventionally understood in terms, so to speak, of a body / world relation thought from the side of the gesturally expressive body). The manifest engagement of this practice with phenomenological conceptions of the embodied character of situated perceptual experience were revealed, through this analysis, to be inherently critical in their institution of institutionally and intersubjectively articulated claims on perceptual experience. Further exploration of his works in terms of Merleau-Ponty's critical conception of instituting subjectivity affirmed the sense in which the earlier critique of *Camera Lucida* was justified in its rejection of an entirely eidetic notion of photographic temporality. Rather, a critical and phenomenological account of Prini's stress on material form, repetition, scale, and his condensed fictionalisation of presuppositions about immediate experience and its inherently mediated character proved articulable in terms of an extended notion of the specific forms of existential spatio-temporality projected through Prini's artworks. The value of this project appeared, through these analyses, to rest on its intransigent and convoluted critique of autonomous art. The richness and complexity of this practice so conceived was also, however, seen to be subject to the threat that its emphatically individualised structure and

focus might also prove limited when confronted with questions of embodiment and cultural experience of a more broadly social character.

It was in the interests of exploring this problem that analysis of Allan Sekula's politicised, critical attempt to articulate a specifically photographic art (that would stand as a critique of contemporary capitalism) was suggested. Placing interpretive stress on Sekula's (to date, critically neglected) artworks rather than his writings alone served to reveal the centrality to his practice of a frankly existential notion of the photographic sign. Furthermore, analysis of his early works showed that this notion was critically transformed in the face of Sekula's conception of the romanticising, potentially nostalgic and ultimately individualistic assertion of critical art practice.

Detailed examination of the projected form of *Untitled Slide Sequence* showed this work to be an attempt to articulate the existential character of photography as social description through the phenomenological treatment of modes of spectatorship, cyclical and repetitive sequential organisation and the ways in which these might provoke a critical aesthetic encounter with a particular set of social contents organised around a notion of working class space. Sekula's later revision of his practice in the direction of a more labile, cross-disciplinary and extended concept of the para-literary was examined in light of these phenomenological emphases and as a less 'obvious' claim on the existential form of photographic description. It was in concluding this discussion through analysis of one complex sequence of images and text that the problem of totality arose in consideration of Sekula's project. Recalling, in light of Sekula's theorisation of photographic signification and his assertion of a critical art of social documentary Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual reversibility suggested the conclusion that Merleau-Ponty's model of

reversibility (as a kind of instituting dehiscence that characterises the emergence of cultural sense), shifted into the register of Sekula's culturally structured photographic art, offers the means by which the paraliterary *and* perceptual might be thought together as being the core of a socially articulated phenomenology of photography.

These are, in summary form, the major themes and conclusions articulated in this the preceding discussion. The thesis was projected as an inquiry into the possibility of a Merleau-Pontian theory of photography and *also* of its value, by which I mean its critical usefulness for current thinking about photography and art. By way of conclusion I will note, briefly, some senses in which the account of photography developed here might prove valuable for criticism.

The fact that Michael Fried's burgeoning interest in the tableaux scaled, ambitious photography of Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth, Thomas Ruff and others is coming to be accepted as an unproblematic and acceptable account of the aesthetic character and historical significance of post-conceptual photographic art practice is indicative of a tendency to relegate the fundamentally self-reflexive historical character of such art to something very much like the generalised aura of melancholic pastness with which Barthes describes photographic culture as such. The exemplary practices listed here remain, despite this fact, extremely interesting, (and perhaps here especially Wall's project when considered alongside his remarkable practice as an essayist). However, there is something deeply troubling about a conception of 'advanced' art that submits itself quite so readily to the erasure of those key aspects of avant-gardist and modernist photographic practices such as the arbitrary and the accidental and an anti-aesthetic orientation towards possible modes of temporality discernible in practices that break with the present in the interests of imagining

the future rather than retrieving the present as a revision of the past and staging the past as something determined by the institutional concerns of art history. Here, perhaps, one can note a tendency in the phenomenological emphasis of certain recent practices that seem to be premised on the idea that a credible photographic art must constitute itself through evacuation of any markers of such avant-gardist intentionality. One effect of this is, perhaps, most visible in Thomas Demand's celebrated constructions of model environments reproduced as large immaculate large-scale prints. For all their serenity and attractive qualities these works constitute a project that accepts only one possible description (and thus only one possible form of critical relation to) a supposed 'flattening out' of the significance of aesthetic experience (Demand's 'world' would seem to perfectly congruent with the fate of cultural meaning described by Villem Flusser and criticised above, for instance). Though, quite literally, far more ambiguous in character than this, the analyses presented in this thesis promise a way of thinking about this situation in terms that remain open to the aesthetically radicalising impetus to formulate and value novel claims on contemporary culture, but to do so with a view to articulating the grounds for these in terms that retain at their core a sense of the problematic status and position of the general character of embodied experience. Such a critical theory would promise to allow a specifically socialised theorisation of embodiment that might avoid the tendency to mimic the forms and flows of capital, for instance, through a stress on the forms and flows of textuality.

THE PROBLEM OF KNOWING HOW WE ARE GRAFTED TO THE UNIVERSAL BY THAT WHICH IS MOST OUR OWN.

This thesis contains within it a number of illustrations of artworks produced by the author. This is a small and indicative selection of works comprising still images of various kinds made during the period of research. Some of them are positioned at the beginning of each chapter (see the list of illustrations given on page 9). This positioning and the conceptual relations it connotes (between the works and the arguments presented in each section) is a good place to start a discussion of the relation between the thesis presented and the production of artworks that has paralleled its development over the period of the last five years. Before going on to do this it should be noted that this selection of images has also been made to give a sense of the development of responses to the general orientation of the project as they include works produced over the period.

Initially, I was reluctant to include any images within the covers of this thesis, let alone attempt their insertion into the argument in any form. Though both aspects of this project are intimately related, they are also (outside of the context of this PhD) supposed to stand on their own as works. The final form of presentation adopted is a compromise between the fact that I conceive of the arguments presented in this thesis and the production of artworks to be parallel activities that, whilst they are related in many ways, by no means constitute an attempt to collapse or dissolve distinctions between theoretical research and art practice. However, over the last five years a number of connections that are specific to this context have emerged and these can be thought of as pertaining to the constitution of the relationships between them as a research project.

The artworks that comprise the 'practical' element of this project are shaped by the explicit decision that for the period of research I would attempt to interrogate, from a number of perspectives, the notion that photography can be addressed as a

phenomenological problem of production, dissemination and consumption. On this side of things photography has not needed to be defined in explicit terms. Instead, anything to do with existing and imagined modalities of image production, dissemination and consumption could fit within the rather labile reach of the various perspectives adopted.

The body of work produced according to this orientation has involved the production of a range of video works in different formats and a range of still images produced using different processes and techniques. None of these video works are illustrated in the present text. Many of these are explicitly made to resist straightforward documentary representation. For instance, one (entitled *Photographs* and part of a series called *Background Surveys*) comprises a single video that is made and remade on every day of the works display. It is produced over and again according to the same criteria involving the selection, recording and discussion of certain aspects of newspaper images (those parts of their backgrounds that are most distant, basically, though the notion of such distance is rendered ambiguous in the process). The discussion of the photographs is improvised according to the criteria set and, together, the growing collection of videos comprises the work, which is thus constitutively unfinished. To be sure, it wouldn't be impossible to illustrate this work here, but on balance the fact that the installed version rests upon the assertion of its minimally changing form to make what sense it does is of central importance to the way in which it approaches mediation of the spatio-temporal characteristics of these acts of 'reading'.

This foregrounds a way of thinking more specifically about the relation between what might seem eccentric in the choice of art practices discussed in the thesis, namely, the focus on Emilio Prini and Allan Sekula. The thesis articulates and justifies the theoretical consideration of these two very different art practices in terms of the problems of

embodiment and sociality discussed. However, this relation should also be taken to resonant with the themes and problems addressed in the artworks presented (or not presented) here as well. For instance, the discussion of Emilio Prini's stress on the immediate experience of highly mediated, prior claims on the immediacy of multiply situated perceptual perspectives relates directly to the claims just made for *Photographs*. The perversely unreadable insistence on material form and perceptual experience of Prini's images (say, especially in terms of their concern for scale and surface) also finds a register in the photographic works that are presented. One can also note that these works bear relation to the concern for documentary form and social content as discussed in terms of Sekula's photographic works. These relations are important for a number of reasons. In terms of their status as critical examples Sekula and Prini make sense of the relation between a phenomenological *and* critical approach to thinking about the possibilities of a specifically photographic art. At the level of their formal and material relation to the author's own artistic practice they stand as markers of an aesthetic project articulated through a range of strategic approaches to certain central problems that are discussed throughout the thesis and centre on the relation between body and world as an existential and phenomenological relation *and* as inherently mediated in the terms of a technically spectacularised socio-historical situation.

Some more concrete descriptive articulation is demanded to clarify what these relations might mean. For instance, *This is a picture of something that turned out to be quite difficult to see*, (2006, p.) and *Forwards on the new course for the health and happiness of our people*, (2006, p.) are very large when printed. Though this scale is limited and to some extent determined by the conditions of display, the major determinant of their scale is the width of the scrawled writing that covers them. Given the limitations of the display context,

this 'handwriting' should be large enough to read only from a distance and from close up to appear as rather ragged but 'pure' white lines that interrupt the highly coloured and pixelated surface of the images. The former image is indeed 'of' something that turned out to be hard to see. At a literal level, it depicts the casually photographed screen of a television showing a salesperson at work on a shopping channel. The resulting overexposed image is overwritten with almost illegible text describing the images illegibility. Through the qualities of colour, surface and line reproduced at large scale and the explicitly 'lame' form of self-commentary, the hope is to suggest or gesture towards something else that is indeed very difficult to envision, namely, the perceptual face of the commodity form. The latter work also uses such overwriting, this time on an digitally scanned image of an old East German postcard, purchased in Berlin well after 1989. The title of this work derives from what, in the printed result, is an almost illegible text that forms the odd looking standard lamp which stands in the corner of this sitting room of a state run holiday camp. These two images deploy a similar strategy as that illustrated at the beginning of chapter three: *"You'll always be dependant on what you find, on what happens" he said and I thought, "well, is that strictly true"?*, (2005). This third image, however, registers a striking (if rather banal and one sided) exchange with a colleague that occurred in discussion of the series of images from which this is taken. The conversation regarded the problematic character of documentary desire in contemporary photographic art practice. All three of these works sit a little uncomfortably in this context as illustrations because they are designed to work simultaneously at a particular perceptual/aesthetic level as large images comprising in areas of colour and more or less abstract patterning of different kinds that will resolve into image and textual 'commentary' (each at different distances) depending on the positioning of the viewer. Other works not illustrated here (such as an ongoing and

open-ended series of images produced under the title of *Bile*, which use a single fragment of one image repetitively as a such a ground) use a similar strategy to develop more or less disjunctive textual narratives. Yet others (such as *I Think They Think I Live Here*, 2005) use the same strategy over two or three repeated versions of the same image.

Two more of the images included here stand out as having a more accidental or, perhaps more appropriately, latent (even unconscious) relation to the chapters in which they are placed. They are instances of what I described above as the realisation of contingent relations between the works of others chosen for discussion and those produced during the period of research. For instance, *The living dead* (2003-4) is a work that was produced before the beginning of this research and was later reworked to the form presented here. It stands as an example of another strategy adopted in addressing photographic scale, surface and the condensed relations between them (and as a retrospectively realised aesthetic response to the character of Barthes treatment of the theme of death as a material factor of photographic experience). To clarify how and why this is so, the way it was made needs to be described in a manner that I usually have deep reservations about. It is a photograph of an old television screen on which can be seen a young female actor who is literally 'playing dead' on a mortuary table whilst other actors perform around her the roles of detective and pathologist. The negative image was printed and the laminate form of the print folded to crease its surface. This was scanned into a computer to be printed out digitally at a larger scale (rendering the figures depicted on a scale estimated to be about half way between their size as screen images and the size of the actors' roughly gauged bodies). The final print form of this work bears in its smooth surface what information survives to tell one about this process, which in a sense is 'all there' but remains, as such, almost illegible. The obvious relation that this work, so described bears to the discussion of Barthes'

hypostatisation of the material qualities of photographic print forms, the reproducibility of photographic images and their technical relation to other mechanical and digital media are clear. It might also stand as another aesthetic linkage between the discussions of Barthes and Prini as they concern different critical treatments of such materiality. A related set of connections between this work and the treatment given photographic formats and depictions of bodies to 'actual size' by Mel Bochner should also be noted. Furthermore, these considerations also apply to the image of *Double time* (2004) that is included at the beginning of chapter two (in which the discussion of Bochner occurs). This last work depicts two standard laboratory timers set to count time 'upwards' from 'zero'. These were placed face down on the screen of a scanner set to scan at its highest resolution (a little over 30,000 dpi). The image depicts the entire field of view of the scanner (a standard A4 sized model) and the timers within it. The scanning took a long time because of the settings and this period is registered on the faces of the almost identical timers as they continued throughout to mark time. The idea was that, in the end, the image produced would be printed so that the timers were depicted at their actual size. But this claim on actuality has a paradoxical material character, or, at least it might lead one to wonder what it is that is being described as material here. The resulting digital image file is huge, far bigger than would be necessary to produce a sharp image at this scale. In fact, its size is an impediment to the storage, manipulation and printing out of the image. This is integral to the work, which, because of its high definition could be quite clearly printed to a massive scale. I think of this excess of information as being a literalisation (in the material terms of the print as an object *and* of the file as its digital source) of the conceptual horizon of the relations between space and time as mediated here and as inseparable in any consideration of what the image, quite literally and quite enigmatically, is as an artwork.

These comments attempt to elucidate how over the period of this research a strategically framed address to the general problematic that orients the written thesis has been approached. They are, to end on a quotation from Merleau-Ponty, modes of interrogating "the problem of knowing how we are grafted to the universal by that which is most our own".[1] In this context, the forms taken by what might be called one's ownmost are revealed to be extensive, perhaps even dissolute and definitively socially mediated, yet also to be characterised by the embodied form of perception through which such reversals might only occur. These reversible relations are, so to speak, instituted in and through the material, perceptual and significatory forms that, as Merleau-Ponty says elsewhere 'have us' rather than us having them. What remains distinctive in this and what I take to be the relationship between this thesis and the art practice that has developed alongside it, is that these are forms that demand critical interrogation in terms of their perceptual characteristics *as forms*.

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[1] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 52.

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